



Young People's Homeless and Housing Pathways: Key findings from a 6-year qualitative longitudinal study

1. What is the study's background?

This study was funded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Programme. The study was undertaken by Dr. Paula Mayock of Trinity College, Dublin, and Dr. Mary-Louise Corr of Edinburgh Napier University.* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2013.

2. What is the study's purpose?

This document reports key findings from a 6-year qualitative longitudinal study of homeless young people in Dublin city. Initiated in 2004, the study set out to generate an in-depth understanding of the process of youth homelessness, with a particular focus on young people's trajectories into, thorough and out of homelessness. The specific research aims were:

- » to identify young people's pathways or trajectories into, through and out of homelessness;
- » to examine the experience of homelessness from the perspective of young people;
- » to identify facilitators and barriers to young people exiting homelessness;
- » to make policy recommendations related to service provision, early intervention and the prevention of negative outcomes.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, the key findings emerging from the study and the main messages for policy. The full report is available on www.dcyia.ie

3. How was the study undertaken?

This qualitative longitudinal study was conducted in three waves: the first between September 2004 and January 2005; the second between September 2005 and August 2006; and the third between September 2009 and August 2010. The life history interview was the study's core method of data collection.

Recruitment, tracking and retention

At baseline (Phase 1), 40 homeless young people (23 young men and 17 young women) were recruited for participation in the research. To be eligible for participation, young people had to be (1) homeless or living in insecure accommodation during the 6 months prior to interview; (2) aged 12-22 years; and (3) living in the Dublin metropolitan district for the past 6 months. Young people were accessed through hostels and residential centres targeting the under-18s, adult hostels, drop-in centres and in street-based settings.

Information on the whereabouts of 37 of the 40 young people was attained during Phase 2 of the study and, of these, a total of 30 were re-interviewed. At Phase 3, 28 young people were re-interviewed and information was available on the living situations of a further 4 participants. Thus, over the course of the study, the retention rates were 75% and 70% for Phases 2 and 3, respectively.

* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 YOUNG PEOPLE'S HOMELESS PATHWAYS

The process of becoming homeless

For this sample of young people, the early to mid-teenage years was the period of greatest risk for homelessness. Although the reasons for young people becoming homeless were complex and multifaceted, it was possible to identify three broad pathways or routes 'into' homelessness. These were associated with (1) a care history; (2) household instability and family conflict; and (3) negative peer associations and 'problem' behaviour (see Research Briefing Note No. 11 for a more detailed account of young people's paths to homelessness: www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/researchdocs/Youth_Homelessness_Study_Briefing_Note_No11.pdf).

Phase 1: The study's young people

At Phase 1 of the study, almost two-thirds (n=25) of the 40 young people interviewed were residing in under-18s emergency or short-term hostel accommodation, which they had accessed through contact with the Out-of-Hours Service. Most of the remaining participants were residing in a short- or medium-term accommodation type and 2 young people were sleeping rough at the time of interview. A considerable number reported lengthy homeless histories at baseline: 11 (just over one-quarter) had been homeless for 2-4 years and a further 8 (one-fifth) for 5 years or more.

A large number reported drug and/or alcohol use, ranging from experimental use to recreational styles of consumption through to heavy and problematic drug use. Half of the study's young people (13 young men and 7 young women) reported lifetime use of heroin and almost all acknowledged that their drug use was problematic to the degree that it had become a dependency. Accounts of criminal activity also featured strongly in many Phase 1 accounts, with nearly three-quarters reporting that they had been charged with a criminal offence at some time.

Phase 2 Pathways: Homeless exits and continued homelessness

The living situations of the 30 young people (now aged between 15 and 25 years) who were re-interviewed at Phase 2 of the study had changed quite dramatically since the conduct of Phase 1 interviews. Many had, since that time, experienced more than one housing transition and a considerable number had lived in a number of different accommodation types. All but one had moved on from emergency or short-term hostel accommodation targeting the under-18s. The analysis

identified 3 distinct housing/homeless pathways, representing movements *either out of homelessness* (Pathways 1 and 2) or *towards more chronic homeless states* (Pathway 3):

- » **Pathway 1:** Independent exits from homelessness (to family home or private rented accommodation) [n=7];
- » **Pathway 2:** Dependent exits from homelessness (to transitional housing or State care) [n=10];
- » **Pathway 3:** Continued homelessness [n=13].

By Phase 2 of the study, 17 young people (5 males and 12 females) had achieved greater stability of housing, having made either an 'independent' or 'dependent' exit from homelessness. Those who exited in an independent sense were categorised in this way to reflect their relative independence from State-subsidised housing or other non-statutory interventions (although private rented sector occupants may have been receiving rent allowance, a supplementary social welfare payment). This distinguishes them from those who made dependent exits to housing provided by NGOs or to State care, where there was ongoing professional social service input and support.

Thirteen young people (11 males and 2 females) remained homeless at Phase 2 and continued to move between temporary or unstable living situations. Of these, 4 (3 males and 1 female) were living in adult hostels, 2 (1 male and 1 female) were sleeping rough and 5 (all male) were incarcerated. One young man was residing in a residential drug treatment programme, which he had accessed directly from hostel accommodation, and another was living in supported housing but awaiting sentencing at the time of interview.

Phase 3 Pathways: Sustained exits and prolonged homelessness

All 28 young people interviewed at Phase 3 of the study (now aged between 18 and 27 years) had transitioned out of services targeting children and young people under the age of 18. Of those re-interviewed, 15 (3 males and 12 females) had exited or maintained a homeless exit, while 13 (12 males and 1 female) remained homeless. Consistent with the patterns identified at Phase 2, far more females than males had exited or sustained an exit from homelessness.

Of the 15 classified as having exited homelessness, a majority (n=9) were living independently by Phase 3, typically in the private rented sector. Others were living in the family home (n=2), local authority housing (n=1), an independent flat (n=1), the home of a partner (n=1) or a residential aftercare setting (n=1). Significantly, 11 of the 15 young people who were living in stable accommodation

at Phase 3 had, in fact, exited homelessness by Phase 2 of the study, indicating that a large number had sustained an exit from homelessness between the two points of follow-up.

Despite a time lapse of between 3 and 4 years, the broad patterns of movement either out of homelessness or towards more chronic homeless states remained relatively stable over time. These patterns are significant in that they point to early transitions out of homelessness as generally sustained and sustainable, and, conversely, to the absence of early exit routes as prolonging young people's homeless 'careers'.

4.2 YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXITING 'JOURNEYS'

As mentioned above, 11 of the 15 young people (3 males and 12 females) categorised as having exited homelessness by Phase 3 of the study had made this transition out of homelessness by Phase 2. This finding signals the importance of early exits from homelessness since, in the main, those who moved out of homelessness relatively quickly sustained this exit from homelessness. Another relatively consistent characteristic among those who had exited at Phase 2 and sustained this exit by Phase 3 was their low level of movement between short-term, emergency or other unstable living situations following their entry to the official network of homeless youth through their contact with the Out-of-Hours Service.

Initial transitions out of homelessness

The physical move to more stable housing was accompanied by emotional upheaval linked to transition and change across other dimensions of personal and social life. Prominent in accounts of the transition from hostel accommodation to stable housing was the sense of isolation young people experienced following the move:

'... after living in the likes of [lists a number of short- and medium-term hostels], I got used to living in a group and then I'm on my own. It's kind of like, Where is everybody?' [Neil, age 26, Phase 3].

There was a strong sense from the narratives that young people had to (re)learn ways of dealing with being housed. This is perhaps unsurprising given that many had spent a considerable period of time 'out of home' prior to embarking on their exiting journeys.

Temporary returns to homelessness and periods of 'hidden' homelessness

Five of the young people who had exited homelessness by Phase 3 of the study reported a temporary return to either 'official' or 'hidden' homelessness following an initial period of living either independently or semi-independently. ('Hidden' homelessness refers

to the phenomenon of living temporarily or sharing accommodation with family members, relatives or friends.) The breakdown of housing was linked to a range of factors and experiences, including financial problems, relapse and/or relationship breakdown. This finding reveals the precariousness of some homeless exits and the vulnerability of at least some young people to a return to homelessness. It also demonstrates that housing can be hard to maintain in cases where young people are struggling with financial difficulties and/or recovering from a substance use problem.

The process of exiting homelessness

Exiting homelessness was a multidimensional process that involved transitions across a range of domains, including family and peer relationships, as well as behavioural transitions most often associated with drug and/or alcohol consumption. These transitions had personal and symbolic significance for young people and played an important role in their exiting journeys. For example, some of the young people drew attention to ways in which their **relationships with peers** had changed over time (e.g. disconnecting from '**all the old people I used to hang around with ... all of the mates I have now are ... clean**') and these relationship transitions were often depicted as enablers to 'getting out' and 'staying out' of homelessness. Others described how their **interactions with family members** had changed, particularly with their mothers with whom many had established a closer relationship. Indeed, the support of family members appeared to have a strong positive influence on young people, with improved relationships, as well as increased contact with parents and other family members, commonly reported among those who exited homelessness.

Six of the young people **transitioned from a dependent exit** (transitional housing or State care) **to an independent exit** (family home or private rented accommodation) over the course of the study, making this a distinctive pathway out of homelessness. Those who progressed along this route appeared to have acquired skills that helped them to access and sustain housing. They also appeared to have regained confidence and self-belief with the help of professionals in these settings.

Irrespective of the route taken by young people out of homelessness, practically all found themselves dealing with some level of **financial stress**. The challenges associated with entering the labour market particularly came to the fore at Phase 3 of the study. Although practically all had completed an educational or training course at some point, only one was currently employed and the majority depended on social welfare payments.

All hoped to gain employment in the future and saw employment as a means of stabilising their lives, in particular their accommodation. However, they were also acutely aware of the barriers they were likely to face in achieving this goal.

The meaning of home

The move to stable housing emerged as a significant 'turning point' experience for all and was one which also supported other positive life transitions. Young people often talked about the sense of security, comfort and privacy that accompanied stable housing and several also specifically mentioned the achievement of independence from services, institutions and agencies of the State: 'Having this place, having me own independence and, eh, finally being out of care' [Lisa, age 20, Phase 3]. Perhaps more than anything, the transition to more permanent accommodation was seen by young people as moving into a place of their own and as a space where they could attempt to create a positive experience of 'home'.

4.3 YOUNG PEOPLE WHO REMAINED HOMELESS

As stated earlier, 13 young people remained homeless by Phase 3 of the study. They were primarily young men who, by this time, had lengthy histories of homelessness.

From youth to adult homelessness

In contrast to young people who had exited homelessness, those who remained homeless at Phase 3 of the study did not move to stable accommodation at an early juncture; instead, they embarked on a cycle of repeated entry to emergency or short-term hostels targeting the under-18s and transitioned to adult homelessness at the age of 18. Several noted the sudden withdrawal of support on reaching that age and they experienced a feeling of abandonment, of being 'dropped' by services, often with no option but to return to the streets.

The process of remaining homeless

The experiences of those who remained homeless signal strong obstacles to them accessing and sustaining housing and these barriers intensified as the duration of homelessness progressed. Ten of the 13 young people who remained homeless had made **temporary exits from homelessness** over the course of the study. Some young men reported unsuccessful attempts at exiting homelessness in the company of a romantic partner, while others had attempted to exit homelessness by accessing semi-independent accommodation or returning to the family home. Such arrangements typically broke down due to their continued criminal activity and/or drug use.

All who remained homeless by Phase 3 of the study had a history of 'heavy end' or dependent **drug use**. Drug use and drug transitions were implicated in their homeless 'careers' in two significant and interconnected ways: (1) increased drug use was depicted by a majority as closely linked to their remaining in the most unstable accommodation types; and (2) remaining in unstable accommodation acted as a strong barrier to young people successfully addressing their drug use.

Young people who remained homeless at Phase 3 reported far more persistent **criminal involvement** and sustained criminal justice contact than those who had exited homelessness. All had a criminal history and 12 of the 13 had been incarcerated at some point, most on multiple occasions. A number of them linked the cycle of incarceration directly to their homelessness, explaining that their criminal activity was motivated by a need 'to survive'. However, their accounts equally suggest that incarceration served to maintain and exacerbate their homelessness and periods of incarceration were sometimes strongly implicated in their failed attempts to exit homelessness.

Acculturation or institutionalisation?

The experiences and transitions of young people who remained homeless may well be suggestive of their growing involvement in street life and it could be posited that many were immersed in a homeless and drugs lifestyle. However, rather than a process of acculturation to a homeless lifestyle, the experiences of those who remained homeless are better characterised as an 'institutional circuit'. Those who remained homeless had spent up to or exceeding a decade, in many cases, without a stable place to live and some had embarked on this circuit at a young age, with histories of State care and/or detention as children. From such early experiences, they entered into multiple systems of intervention. For some, this constant movement between services marked a 'life cycle' that became increasingly difficult to break.

5. Key messages for policy

1. Pathways 'into' homelessness

- » Histories of State care and breakdown of family relationships emerged as the two dominant experiences associated with young people becoming homeless.
- » Working proactively with young people at risk of homelessness and their families, whether through family mediation or the provision of respite arrangements, is essential. Such work can enable young people to remain or return home in cases where this is a safe and appropriate option.

- » Continued investment in homeless prevention is required to ensure that all possible measures are taken to avert homelessness. Similarly, early intervention efforts are critical to ensuring that the 'newly' homeless do not join the ranks of the longer term homeless. Particular efforts need to be invested in identifying young people who are living in 'hidden' homeless situations and at risk of entering homeless systems and services.

2. The importance of early exits from homelessness

- » One of the clearest messages arising from this research is the importance of speedy exits from homelessness. Those young people who 'got out' early were likely to 'stay out', even if a number did return to homelessness temporarily for a period.
- » This finding signals a need for timely, planned access to stable housing for young people who experience homelessness.

3. From youth to adult homelessness

- » The transfer from children (under 18) to adult homeless services presents a major risk and emerged as a significant 'crisis point' for young people who made this transition. Currently, a young person may lose most, if not all, of their prior supports on reaching the age of 18 and are then required to seek assistance from adult services.
- » It is critical that young homeless people do not experience an abrupt end to formal support services at the age of 18. This sudden removal of support clearly diminishes their prospect of negotiating a successful exit from homelessness.
- » More fluid systems of intervention, designed to meet the needs of young people aged 18-25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, are required in order to prevent young people from entering the world of adult homelessness.

4. Housing and support options for young people

- » Young people who experience homelessness are a heterogeneous group. Their paths to homelessness vary and they enter homeless services having encountered a wide variety of disruptions and difficulties, accompanied in most cases by traumatic life experiences. Young people who experience homelessness have diverse needs and there is consequently no single, 'one size fits all' solution to their situations.
- » Transitional or supported housing is likely to be an appropriate option for many who cannot return home, particularly for those young people in the age

range 16-21 who have complex needs and lack the confidence and skills to live independently. Equally, clear and attainable goals are required for those young people who enter transitional accommodation to ensure that they do not become 'stuck' in this provision.

- » Affordable housing options for young people on benefits or low incomes are currently extremely limited. This situation means that homeless accommodation may be the only viable option for young people who are unable to access affordable housing.
- » Irrespective of the route taken by young people out of homelessness – whether they return home, move to transitional accommodation or exit directly to an independent living situation – support *whilst in housing* is required to ensure that young people have the requisite assistance to bolster their chances of sustaining housing.

5. Supporting the transition to independent living

- » A clear finding arising from this research is that the process of exiting homelessness is an incremental one. In other words, young people are very likely to experience challenges and setbacks following the initial move out of homelessness and some may be vulnerable to returning to homelessness.
- » The provision of appropriate support services following the transition to independent living is essential if returns to homelessness are to be avoided. Housing assistance and support should aim to help young people identify appropriate housing options, negotiate with landlords and intervene if problems develop. It should also help young people to identify educational and training options that increase their future employment prospects.
- » The provision of specialist health and care services, including mental health and drug treatment services, will be essential for some in preventing a return to homelessness.
- » For those young people with a history of State care, aftercare support is critical. Despite recent improvements in aftercare provision, many young people currently leaving care in Ireland do not receive the ongoing supports required to make a successful transition to independent living.

6. Sustaining housing

- » Young people with a history of homelessness are likely to face particular difficulties in accessing education, employment and other developmental and transitional opportunities. Many may have also experienced (and are still recovering from) traumatic



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life experiences and life events. Sustained exits from homelessness require access to stable and secure housing as an essential first step. However, additional supports are needed if young people are to have a realistic chance of successfully maintaining housing.

- » Family support emerged as an important enabler to young people in exiting homelessness and in sustaining housing, irrespective of the route taken by them out of homelessness. This finding highlights the importance of working in collaborative ways with homeless young people and their families in order to rebuild and maintain relationships, which can, in turn, bolster their prospects of sustaining housing.
- » Specialist support services, particularly mental health and alcohol/drug services, are required to ensure that young people have a realistic prospect of sustaining housing.

7. Gender and the homeless pathways of young people

- » The findings of this research strongly suggest that young women were far more likely to exit homelessness than their male counterparts. Compared to young men, women exited homelessness at an earlier juncture and they also tended to sustain housing, even if some returned to homelessness temporarily.
- » Housing options, including returns to the family home, placement in residential or foster care, and moves to transitional or supported housing were more readily available to young women at an early juncture. In place of stable housing, young men often embarked on an 'institutional circuit' of commuting between under-18s hostels initially and then between adult homeless services. Incarceration emerged as a key component of this cyclical pattern of movement through various unstable accommodation types as alternatives to stable housing.

8. Monitoring youth homelessness

- » The lack of reliable data clearly thwarts any attempt to accurately measure the scale of the problem of homelessness among children and young people in Ireland and to trace changes over time.
- » The problems and limitations associated with current measures of homelessness among children and young people highlight the need to develop a more comprehensive information system on child and youth homelessness.
- » Targeted research is needed to improve knowledge and understanding of 'hidden' homelessness among children and young people.

6. What are the benefits of the study?

The longitudinal design of this qualitative study is a major strength and has permitted an exploration of transition and change in the lives of young people who first experience homelessness as teenagers. The findings of the study are numerous and complex, but draw attention in particular to the processes that generate and mediate both positive and less desirable housing outcomes and solutions. They also challenge us to reconsider how we understand and conceptualise the problem we call 'youth homelessness', the definitions we deploy to delineate the problem, as well as the 'shape' and ultimate aim and effectiveness of the policies and service structures designed to meet the needs of young people who experience homeless or housing instability.