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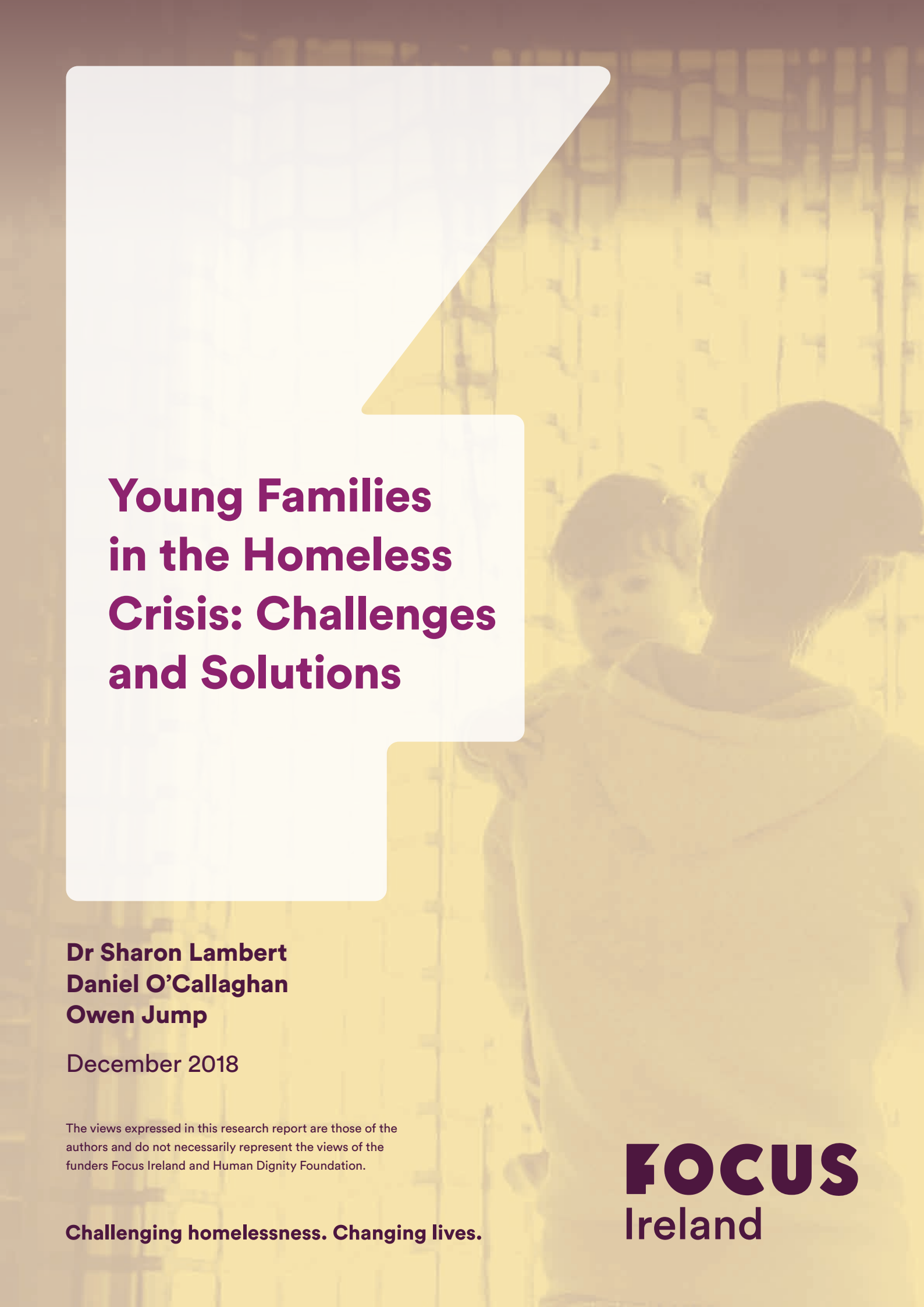


Young Families in the Homeless Crisis: Challenges and Solutions

Dr Sharon Lambert
Daniel O'Callaghan
Owen Jump

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

FOCUS Ireland



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December 2018

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
	About the Authors	2
	Acknowledgements	3
	Study Vignette	4
Chapter 1	**Introduction**	5
1.1	Focus Ireland	5
1.2	Homelessness in Ireland	6
1.3	Young Parents and Family Homelessness Literature	6
1.4	Report Structure	10
Chapter 2	**Methodology**	11
2.1	Qualitative Approach	12
2.2	Phases of the Research Process	12
2.3	Profile of Parents Participating in the Study	15
2.4	Strengths and Limitations of the Methodology	18
Chapter 3	**Young Families Experiencing Homelessness**	19
3.1	Dynamics of the Family Home	20
3.2	Navigating the Housing System	26
3.3	Uncertainty and Influence on Perceived Housing Options	29
Chapter 4	**Stakeholders' Experience with this Cohort**	33
4.1	Young Families Entering Homelessness	34
4.2	Housing Options from the Service Perspective	36
4.3	Support Implementation	39
Chapter 5	**Conclusions and Recommendations**	42
	Bibliography	46
	Appendices	48

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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 research[2] 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.

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[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

About the Authors

Dr Sharon Lambert is a lecturer and published author in the School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork (UCC). Following a number of years working in community-based settings, Sharon joined the teaching staff in Applied Psychology in 2015. Her research interests revolve primarily around the impact of trauma on mental health and addiction and the consequent effects for service design and evaluation. Sharon works with a range of community partners on collaborative research projects in the areas of homelessness, addiction and trauma.

Daniel O'Callaghan is an MA Applied Psychology graduate working as a researcher in the School of Applied Psychology, UCC. Daniel's research to date has been embedded within community organisations and he has successfully tendered for a range of research projects in the areas of addiction and homelessness. Daniel co-authored the Cork HSE Suicide Prevention Office *Connecting for Life* report.

Owen Jump is a PhD Candidate in Applied Health and Biological Psychology, UCC. He completed a BA Hons in Applied Psychology at UCC, 2011–2014. Owen previously worked in the area of drug rehabilitation, suicide prevention and mental health intervention for vulnerable populations. Current research interests include laboratory measurement techniques, technology and mental health interventions, pathways to homelessness in the community, community-based participatory research and research in teaching and learning in higher education.

Research team: Dr Sharon Lambert (Applied Psychology, UCC), Dr Aisling Parkes (School of Law, UCC), Dr Orla Lynch (Criminology, UCC), Daniel O'Callaghan (Applied Psychology, UCC), Owen Jump (Applied Psychology, UCC).

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The research team would like to extend its thanks and deepest appreciation to the parents who participated in this study. Thank you for sharing your time, your stories and your experiences with us. Your contribution to this report is sincerely appreciated and gratefully acknowledged. Without your assistance, undertaking this research would not have been possible.

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 advisory committee for this study as well as 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 collaboration.

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

- Catherine Maher (Focus Ireland)
- Holly Morrin (Dublin Region Homeless Executive)
- Roisin McDonnell (Focus Ireland)
- Mary Murphy (University of Maynooth and Focus Ireland Research Advisory Group)
- Bernie O'Donoghue Hynes (formerly Dublin Region Homeless Executive)
- Eoin O'Sullivan (Trinity College Dublin and Focus Ireland Research Advisory Group)
- June Tinsley (Barnardos)
- Aidan Waterstone (Tusla)

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.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This publication documents the key findings to emerge from a qualitative study of young parents experiencing homelessness in Ireland. The research aimed to identify the pathways into homelessness for a cohort of young parents (18–24 years), to understand their experiences of homeless services, and to examine the potential barriers they face in exiting homelessness. Conducted throughout the first half of 2018, during which time young parents and key stakeholders were interviewed, the study had the following aims:

- 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.

1.1 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.

1.2 Homelessness in Ireland

The total number of people presenting as homeless in Ireland has increased consistently in the past number of years – a figure which is inclusive of many young families and children. The issue is now a national high priority and of significant social and political concern. Evidence-based services' response and prevention policies are fundamental to the well-being of those currently experiencing homelessness. The critical nature of this issue is highlighted by current national statistics,[3] taken with respect to those registered with state-funded emergency accommodation, which show that:

- 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. These figures illustrate a 15% increase from the 8,270 individuals who were officially recorded as homeless in August 2017. These statistics do not include those experiencing hidden homelessness (i.e. those who are staying with friends or family, or those living in inadequate or overcrowded accommodation).
- 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, there were 1,046 single-parent families experiencing homelessness in Ireland at the end of August 2018.
- The number of young adults (18–24 years) identifying as homeless in Ireland totalled 875 by August of 2018. This cohort has been heavily represented in statistics in recent years. Dublin Region Homeless Executive analysis reported that 24% and 23% during 2016 and 2017, respectively, were aged between 18 and 24 years. This data refers to the entire population of homeless families for those years (n=1,878) (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2018). Similarly, Focus Ireland found that 26% of homeless families were between the ages of 18 and 24, according to data collected during 2016 (Sheridan and Hoey, 2017).
- Issues relating to the private rented sector accounted for 57% of families entering homelessness in 2016 (Sheridan and Hoey, 2017).

1.3 Young Parents and Family Homelessness Literature

1.3.1 Young Parents and New Family Formation

The age at which family formation is initiated has important socio-economic implications. As the transition to parenthood presents many new and unfamiliar demands, new family formation can be a challenging experience, especially for younger parents (Moore and Hofferth, 1980). The significant life changes that occur in early parenthood are well-documented and can affect progress in employment and education, which are key components to developing a stable family life (ibid.). Parenthood may be particularly challenging for young parents, particularly in situations of unstable or inadequate housing (Hofferth and Goldscheider, 2010). New family formation at a young age can leave parents and their children vulnerable to the risks associated with early parenthood, such as a lack of general family stability, financial and housing issues, or relationship strain with partners

[3] https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/; https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data

(Florsheim et al., 2012). The challenging nature of early parenthood thereby increases the possibility of lone parenthood, a common occurrence within younger family units (Bynner et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2006). The traditional nature of parenting usually dictates a larger responsibility for the mother, who is then placed at a higher risk of becoming homeless due to financial and childcare burden and/or lack of employment history (Hofferth and Golscheider, 2010; Baptista et al., 2017).

In the absence of stable housing and financial support, parents may rely on the family home where barriers to childcare, education and employment may be reduced. For young families, parenthood can be an isolating and anxious experience, and there is evidence to suggest that grandparents can serve as interactive support agents (Tinsley and Parke, 1987). Where possible, the family home of origin can serve as a hospitable environment that offers the necessary resources to increase a young parent's quality of life, enabling opportunities to upskill prior to living independently. In the absence of suitable childcare, however, investing in education or training becomes a significant difficulty for young parents. Parenthood requires a long-term financial commitment which can reduce the parent's ability to secure educational attainment or achieve suitable housing, even more so in the case of lone parent families who operate on a reduced budget (Hofferth and Goldscheider, 2010). If living independently or in the family home of origin are not viable housing options, young parents are stripped of resources such as time, money and childcare. This can negatively affect their long-term prospects as they struggle to gather the resources to develop their own parenting and life skills (Elliott et al., 2017). There are also implications for the long-term prospects of the child, as growing up in an under-resourced family unit may act as a pathway for children to enter their own insecure family structures in the future (Aquilino, 1996).

1.3.2 Family Homelessness

Studies on family homelessness have identified several pathways that may lead to initial contact with homeless services, and consistent themes have emerged across both national and international literature. It is generally acknowledged that family homelessness can result from a diverse range of structural and individual circumstances (Sylvestre et al., 2017). Internationally, key findings identify complications in the housing market as the leading cause of family homelessness, such as difficulty in securing and sustaining affordable housing and withdrawal of property while under tenancy in the private rented sector. The evidence base also draws attention to the impact of relationship breakdown, physical or mental illness, and a history of parental and/or substance abuse in the family home of origin (Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013; Sylvestre et al., 2017). Coinciding with international data, telephone surveys with families experiencing homelessness conducted by Focus Ireland show that housing market issues (specifically, losing private rented accommodation and a lack of affordable housing options) dominate the causes of family homelessness (Sheridan and Hoey, 2017). Family conflict and overcrowding also play a part in families' routes into homelessness. A recent European FEANTSA report states that Ireland's family homelessness population comprises high levels of lone mothers and high levels of hidden homelessness and, relevant to this report, that young parents are disproportionately represented (Baptista et al., 2017). There is also a significant over-representation of female-headed single-parent families according to homelessness statistics (Department of Housing, 2018).

There is evidence to suggest that many lone mothers in Ireland are experiencing 'hidden homelessness', where families without their own housing live with friends, family or acquaintances (Baptista et al., 2017). Many of these parents stay with friends/family members for several months, or years, before exhausting their resources and presenting to a local authority (Baptista et al., 2017; Grotti et al., 2018). A major response to the current homelessness crisis on the part of government is subsidising low income households to compete in the private rental sector through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme. However, supply remains an issue and rents continue to increase, thereby severely constricting the availability of private rented housing for families (Stanley and Allen, 2018). Single-parent families may live on a limited budget and doubling up with family members can be seen as a temporary solution to their housing problem (Baptista et al., 2017).

1.3.3 Young Families and Homelessness

There is a consistent cohort of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years entering homelessness who appear particularly marginalised from the housing market. This youth cohort represented 24% and 23% of all families in emergency accommodation during 2016 and 2017, respectively (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2018). Evidence suggests that the leading causes of homelessness for Irish families are rooted in the dynamics of the housing market (Sheridan and Hoey, 2017), but this cohort may also be impacted by other factors.

The combination of their young age and multiple systemic barriers puts this vulnerable group at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to secure and sustain affordable housing (Sylvestre et al., 2017). There is research to suggest that younger parents are actively discriminated against when navigating the private housing market. Recent national findings suggest that younger individuals and families are treated less favourably than other groups when attempting to secure housing, and lone mothers are the family arrangement most commonly affected by discrimination (Grotti et al., 2018). Given the heavy representation of lone mothers in young family homelessness, this is a growing cause for concern.

Some of these young families have little or no experience of sustaining their own independent tenancies (Sheridan and Hoey, 2017; Sheridan, 2017), which impairs their chances of securing stable housing from a landlord. However, even with rental subsidies, securing housing can be difficult for young families as they compete with other groups who are not subjected to similar levels of prejudice in the selection process. Such groups of the population who are found to be at a disadvantage in the private rental market merit particular policy focus to alleviate discrimination (Grotti et al., 2018). From an affordability perspective, young adults tend to have less income and savings and less knowledge about accessing housing resources (Toolis and Hammack, 2015). Accessing the private rented sector can be problematic for young families, particularly in the case of unemployed parents, and they may report limited understanding of their housing rights (Taylor and Sharpe, 2008; Sheridan and Hoey, 2017). Young families may be left with no option but to present to local authorities in the absence of affordable housing or adequate space in their family of origin. There has been some public discussion of the idea that families are becoming homeless simply to place themselves in a more advantageous position for the allocation of social housing ('gaming the system'). While no evidence has been presented

to support such a view, it has already had some influence on public policy approaches (Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2018; Kelly, 2018).

The dearth of research exploring the lives of young parents who experience homelessness and interact with services while navigating the housing system contributes to a situation in which speculation is widespread, with potential negative impacts on families due to internalised feelings of stigma and inappropriate policy response.

1.3.4 Experience of Young Homeless Parents

Young families can report a diverse set of needs and vulnerabilities to housing precariousness which may not be addressed by policy-makers or service providers (Aviles and Helfrich, 2004). Research has found that some parents can report material and psychological challenges, and intergenerational transmission of socio-economic and psychological complications (which can also subsequently affect the children of these parents) (Taylor and Sharpe, 2008; Sylvestre et al., 2017). For children, the housing and health of parents can provide the most vital means to stability (Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013).

Effects on Parenting Skills and Children

Given the tumultuous nature of homeless emergency accommodation, these environments are not conducive to the development of young children and negatively impact on parenting capacity (Aviles and Helfrich, 2004). While emergency accommodations vary, the majority of these facilities have rules and regulations that can affect meal times and family life more broadly, whilst also institutionalising families within a controlled environment (Swick, 2009). Furthermore, emergency accommodation centres can affect a child's routine, with evidence to suggest that the stress of these environments elicit behavioural changes in children (Baptista et al., 2017). Limited cooking and storage opportunities tend to encourage poor diet and resulting malnutrition for both children and parents, with a prevalence of take-away meals and cheap convenience foods (Share and Hennessy, 2017). Those residing in emergency accommodation need to be supported in the areas of education, housing and physical and mental healthcare (Aviles and Helfrich, 2004).

Stigma

Stigma is a recurring theme in homelessness literature, and the negative connotations associated with homelessness are intensified for young families. The common cultural perspective of homelessness associated with individual failure can lead to negative public perceptions about the parent's ability to adequately care for their child (Toolis and Hammack, 2015). Increased exposure to stigma of this nature can impact parents' self-esteem (Swick, 2009; Toolis and Hammack, 2015). Furthermore, based on these connotations, this can affect the social support available to these families from family and friends (Swick, 2009). Social stigma of this kind can also affect children; those who attend school may hide their housing status from peers due to fear of social exclusion (Baptista et al., 2017).

1.3.5 Supporting this Cohort

The overwhelming number of families experiencing homelessness in the Dublin area places a strain on emergency service providers in this sector. The demand for emergency services continues to worsen as the duration of homelessness among families is increasing (Stanley and Allen, 2018). Understanding the experiences of these young parents with respect to the reasons for their homelessness and their attempts to secure housing will provide a valuable insight into how services can appropriately support this cohort. Given the lack of national research in this area, it is important to understand what young parents come to expect and need from their interaction with emergency homeless services.

1.4 Report Structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2: This section outlines the methodological approach used in this report and includes a breakdown of demographic information regarding the participants interviewed.

Chapter 3: This chapter explores the experiences of families who were interviewed, using thematic analysis and relevant quotations. The results explore the dynamics of their family home which led to their homelessness and their experience of trying to exit homelessness and navigating the housing market.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents the perspective of the stakeholders who were interviewed, to understand the needs of young parents form a policy and service perspective.

Chapter 5: This section discusses the conclusions and recommendations based on the data presented on the young parents and key stakeholders who were interviewed.

Chapter 2

Methodology

The primary focus of this research was to engage with young parent families and gain an insight into their experiences of becoming homeless and their efforts to try to navigate out of homelessness. This was a qualitative study which focused on the perspective of the families themselves with regard to their own pathways into and through homelessness. Furthermore, perspectives of professionals in housing support positions were obtained as the research sought to provide a services perspective on meeting the needs of young parents in homeless accommodation.

As previously stated, the objectives of the study were as follows:

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

Throughout the research process, the goal was to further the general understanding of an under-researched cohort who may exhibit specific challenges and vulnerabilities. Therefore, a key outcome of this study is to inform services design and delivery in catering to the needs of this group.

2.1 Qualitative Approach

A qualitative methodological approach was used to gather data on the families' own personal accounts. The research team set out to engage with families through semi-structured interviews, facilitating a comprehensive discussion of observations, perspectives and suggestions based on their experience of homelessness. A thematic analysis allowed for a thorough investigation of the direct accounts given by participants – inclusive of their housing journeys, contact with services, their well-being, relationships, and other specific challenges faced by this cohort of young people. Participants were identified through purposive sampling with the support of Focus Ireland Homeless Action Team service staff, and, in a small number of cases, snowball sampling through family members.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven professionals, which included those working in front-line support services and local authority staff. These were conducted to capture their experiences of catering to the needs of young parents experiencing homelessness.

2.2 Phases of the Research Process

2.2.1 Preparation

The initial phase of the project consisted of groundwork and communication between Focus Ireland and the research team. The project details and requirements were outlined, including the demographic criteria for participant recruitment. The 18–24-year-old parent demographic was selected due to the focus of the study. Policy and framework documents surrounding family homelessness in Ireland were reviewed and a further literature review was then carried out using both national and international research to gain an insight into the existing evidence of homelessness and young parents.

Two interview templates were finalised – one for stakeholder interviews, and one for interviews with family members. In each case, the template was structured in a manner that allowed the participant to speak freely about their experiences. Stakeholder interviews were conducted by telephone, and interviews with families were conducted face-to-face due to the personal nature of the topic.

The focus of the study was on the Dublin area but a small number of interviews were conducted in Cork and Limerick. The criteria for inclusion into the study included:

- parents aged 18–24 years old (single or in a couple) living with their children in emergency accommodation;
- parents who lived with family before presenting as homeless **or** had little experience of living in independent accommodation.
- The seven stakeholders 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

2.2.2 Data Collection

Interviews were carried out between February 2018 and July 2018. Interviews with stakeholders and family members were carried out concurrently during this time.

Interviews with Stakeholders

The staff members who were interviewed had direct contact with young parent families in homeless situations, which provided valuable insights to the current study. A total of 7 interviews were carried out: 6 of these were based in Dublin, while 1 was based in Limerick. The researcher made initial contact by email, attaching an information sheet for the study. If consent to participate was confirmed, a time for a telephone call was organised. The next point of contact was the interview itself. Interviews were carried out by telephone and were an average of 15–25 minutes in length.

Discussions with stakeholders focused around the following:

- The nature of their role and experience with young families.
- Their understanding of the pathways into homelessness for young families.
- Suggestions of the best housing options for the cohort.
- Challenges they face as service providers and challenges they see homeless families facing.
- How they feel the cohort can be best supported.

Interviews with Young Parents Experiencing Homelessness

To remain in line with current ethical procedures for research, Focus Ireland staff members made initial contact with eligible families residing in homeless accommodation services to invite them to take part in the research. 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. If a parent wished to participate following contact from a staff member, a link was made with the researcher and a meeting was set up for a face-to-face interview. Throughout the data collection process, there were difficulties securing parents for interviews. Understandably, due to the chaotic nature of their living situations, commitment to an interview was subject to sudden change and there were many cases where scheduled interviews did not take place. In those cases, a new family was contacted, and a new interview scheduled. In total, 18 interviews took place with family members. A family profile for the final sample is available in the following section.

Interviews were conducted in locations that were convenient for the parent – either in a public space of choice or a private space or area within the accommodation setting. One interview was carried out in a café close to the parent's residence. In the case of 9 interviews, children were present. These interviews had to be paused periodically due to disruption and this affected the flow of the interview as, invariably, participants distracted by the presence of their children spent time speaking about the challenges experienced by the children. Of the remaining interviews, children were in the care of their partner.

Interviews ranged from 25 to 60 minutes. The participants were predominantly Irish, with two migrant families represented. Participants were briefed prior to the interview and debriefed following the interview.

The interview schedule centred on the following:

- Pathways into homelessness.
- Housing history.
- Parenting skills and the impact of homelessness on children.
- Experience in current accommodation and accessing services.
- How families feel they could be best supported.

The full templates for the interview schedules are available in the appendices.

2.2.3 Ethical Considerations

Both Focus Ireland and the research team ensured adherence to the ethical standards expected of a research topic involving a vulnerable population. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Ethics Committee in the School of Applied Psychology, UCC. When engaging with participants, the research team committed to the Ethical Protocol of Focus Ireland and those governing psychological research (BPS, APA, PSI), and ensured the following:

- Informed consent;
- Privacy;
- Confidentiality;
- Fairness and equity;
- Avoidance, prevention or minimisation of harm to others;
- Professional competence;
- Integrity;
- Respect for human rights, diversity and equality
- Data protection and;
- Social responsibility.

Participants were reassured that they were under no obligation to participate and could withdraw from the study if they wished, up until the point that the final report was drafted. Procedures were followed for recording conversations in line with the above principles.

2.2.4 Analysis and Reporting

The analysis stage of the research process took place between June and July 2018. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. Relevant themes were identified during this process to form the basis of the results displayed in this report.

Following this, stakeholder interviews were systematically analysed. Themes from both groups were then combined and compared to form an overarching report.

2.3 Profile of Parents Participating in the Study

A total of 18 families participated in the study, and all have been identified as homeless parents between the ages of 18 and 24. This section illustrates the characteristics of these parents and details their journeys into homelessness.

2.3.1 Location

Parents and stakeholders were interviewed across three locations – Dublin, Limerick and Cork – as identified in Table 1. Participants in the Dublin area were prioritised, given the heavy representation of this area in the family homelessness literature.

Location	Number of Parents	Number of Stakeholders
Dublin	15	6
Limerick	0	1
Cork	3	0

Table 1: Profile of participants interviewed by location

2.3.2 Gender

Fifteen family respondents were female and three were male; six of the stakeholders were female and one was male.

2.3.3 Age

As previously stated, the age range consisted of 18 to 24-year-olds. In the sample population for this study, the youngest were aged 20, while the majority were towards the top of the age bracket, 24 years, as shown in Table 2.

Age	Number of Participants
20	3
21	1
22	3
23	3
24	8

Table 2: Age range of participants

2.3.4 Ethnicity

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

2.3.5 Family Status of Parents

Half of respondents (n=9) were parenting alone, all of whom were single mothers. One of these mothers stated that although she was not in a relationship with the father, he had provided support since she became homeless. There were no single fathers involved in the current study. The remaining participants were either married or in a relationship with their partner.

Thirteen participants had one child, while the remaining five participants had two children. Three women were pregnant at the time of interview (two were pregnant with their second child and one with a third child).

Across all 18 participants, there were 23 children. Children were of various ages, but none exceeded the age of five as shown in Table 3. The following table provides an outline of children's ages for this study. Five participants did not specify the age of their children. Three children were under 12 months old.

Ages of children	Number of children
> 1 years	4
1–2 years	4
3–4 years	5
5 years	5
Not specified	5

Table 3: Age of children across families

2.3.6 Educational Attainment

The parents involved in this study reported varying educational levels and backgrounds. 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. One other participant was a nursing student but suspended the course due to her role as a parent experiencing homelessness but plans to return as soon as possible.

Homelessness evidently has a very disruptive effect on education for this cohort. Six of the participants reported interrupted educational ventures. Reasons for inability to remain in education were stated as parental duties, becoming homeless, or a combination of both. Four participants did not disclose their educational attainment. One participant completed an educational course in childcare and secured employment but had to leave the post due to her responsibilities as a lone parent.

2.3.7 Housing History

Given the limited evidence base surrounding young parents experiencing homelessness in Ireland, investigating the housing histories of the families involved was a priority throughout the interview process.

Current Accommodation

For the purposes of this report, the current living arrangements of respondents were also noted. 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.

Housing History

While most came directly from their family of origin into homelessness, some were care leavers. As shown in Table 4, 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. In these cases, their housing history with their family was one of stability. However, four participants reported a more precarious housing history growing up. Two participants spent most of their childhood in care and reported instability during their time in care. One male participant reported moving between homes of relatives throughout much of his childhood. The EU participant lived nomadically in her country of origin before moving to Ireland with her family. This cohort of research participants, broadly speaking, reported very limited experience in the housing market.

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 4: Family home of origin accommodation types

2.4 Strengths and Limitations of the Methodology

Taking a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis allowed for the exploration of the narratives of young families experiencing homelessness, and through the use of semi-structured interviews, both the research team and the participants were able to engage in meaningful discussions guided by the interview schedule. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed for further exploration of any unexpected material that might have been of significant value to the research. In terms of examining data, thematic analysis proved to be a powerful analytical tool that collated the experiences of young parents and identified trends across cases.

Another strength to this study's research design was the inclusion of stakeholders from a variety of professional support roles as participants. Although the young parents experiencing homelessness were the central focus, stakeholder interviews were considered essential in order to add further depth to the knowledge base surrounding these families.

A notable limitation is the small sample size, due to delays and difficulties in the recruitment process. Securing a sufficient number of young parents for this study proved to be more difficult than originally anticipated. While there were efforts taken to recruit a diverse sample of families who fit the criteria of the study, the findings from this study only refer to a sample of the wider population of young families experiencing homelessness. Similarly, the study primarily documents the experience of Dublin-based families; the experience of families in other locations around the country may vary.

Another significant limitation refers to the lack of inclusion of stakeholders from the private rented sector. There is continual reference to the private rented sector, letting agents and landlords, throughout this report from both participant groups.

Chapter 3

Young Families Experiencing Homelessness

To get a comprehensive understanding of how new family formation among young families can lead to homelessness, it is important to consider the preceding family and housing trajectories experienced by young parents. Focusing on the trajectories into homelessness provides a valuable insight into the journeys and challenges this cohort experience as they navigate the Irish housing system.

This chapter outlines the results of the thematic analysis carried out and is divided into sub-sections based on recurring themes that emerged from the data. Overall, this report intends to shed light on the pathways into homelessness for young families who have limited experience as an independent family unit. Table 5 presents the overarching themes as well as the sub-themes which emerged in the narrative of the families, all of which will be examined in this chapter.

Themes	Sub-themes
Dynamics of the Family Home	3.1.1 Parental Relationships in the Family Home 3.1.2 The 'Tipping Point' and Overcrowding 3.1.3 Mental Health, Physical Illness and Substance Misuse of Family Members
Navigating the Housing System	3.2.1 Circumstantial Barriers to Securing Alternative Accommodation 3.2.2 Competition in the Housing Market 3.2.3 Discrimination in the Housing Market
Uncertainty and Influence on Perceived Housing Options	3.3.1 Growing Dependency on Emergency Accommodation and Perceived Housing Options 3.3.2 Housing Policies and Young Parents 3.3.3 Interaction with Services

Table 5: Emerging themes and sub-themes from parent interviews

3.1 Dynamics of the Family Home

This theme outlines the impact of family backgrounds on subsequent family stability. These family homes were strained by various issues such as housing type, relationship with parents, overcrowding, substance misuse and poor health of family members. These issues were highlighted as the most common pathways into homelessness for young parents. Some participants were forced to leave the family home, while others made the decision to do so, with the welfare of their child as the central motive. Although there are a wide variety of circumstances highlighted in the data, as each experience is specific to the family involved, there is a common thread throughout the narratives of all participants in that the addition of a young child caused a shift in the dynamics of the family home. It is worth noting that while some families do follow straightforward trajectories from the family home straight into homeless accommodation, many have experienced forms of 'hidden homelessness' and more protracted pathways into homeless accommodation.

3.1.1 Parental Relationships in the Family Home

Due to their age, the participants in this study had lived in the family home of origin, or in care, for most of their lives. As a result, the relationship between the participants and their parents played a prominent role in their current situation. 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. It is important to note that this impact can vary from family to family, but this theme highlights how the change in parental relationships can ultimately necessitate leaving the family home of origin for these young parents.

One single mother explained how there was no pre-existing negativity in her relationship with her mother. However, this relationship began to deteriorate over time as she continued to reside in the family home after giving birth to her child. The birth of a second child was a driving force behind her decision to leave home.

> **'Like, she'd never really, like, see me 'cos I was always out with my friends and all that but, now, like, since I had [child], I was kind of around the house more and she was kind of, like ... I don't know ... Like, it was just too hard, like ... I was, like, I have to get out.' Abbey,[4] 20**

The gradual deterioration of the relationship with her mother can be viewed as a natural transition where the adult child outgrows the family home and in ideal circumstances the adult child would be in a position to secure her own independent living. The participant refers to difficulties around interference with his/her parenting which led to continual conflict. Given their previously defined roles of mother and daughter, the arrival of a new baby affected these identities. The young parent was thrust into a motherhood role while living with her own mother. Being forced to adapt her lifestyle to cater for her child in the family home of origin led to a conflict, which highlights the potential impact of having a child in the family home. Ultimately, the participant was left with no other option but to present as homeless because living in the family home became unsustainable. There are two significant findings from this and similar examples: some young parents may feel

[4] Pseudonyms have been provided for all participants in this report.

forced to make decisions to leave home; and the addition of a child to the family unit can give rise to familial tension despite no previous history of significant strain.

The probability of relationship difficulties between participants and their parents is increased if there are pre-existing tensions between them, and when a baby is factored into the existing family dynamic, these troubles are exacerbated. The following is one such case, where the participant and her mother had a strained relationship prior to the arrival of a baby.

> **'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

The impact of having a child while living in the family home is clear here, as it contributed to the dissolution of the already 'fragile' relationship. The participant's mother expressed her disappointment with the pregnancy and, due to the already unstable relationship between them, the participant felt compelled to leave home after describing what she considered to be a toxic environment with regards to the welfare of her child. They are prepared to endure difficult and unknown circumstances by leaving the family home in an attempt to improve their children's circumstances. These decisions are made for the children's well-being, both current and long-term. Participants demonstrated strong feelings about the fact that their current living arrangements (in emergency accommodation), although not ideal, were more suitable than their own family home (particularly for the children). Where attempts were made to return to the family home, this resulted in further relationship breakdown and more instability for the 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

However, 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

In the above example, it was the mother of the household who made the decision to eject her daughter from the family home (as indicated in the quote above, the participant's mother wrote a formal letter to her daughter asking her to leave). The relationship was already strained and the addition of a child further complicated matters. The participant was not immediately forced out of home, but the situation worsened over time. The 'fuss' with the baby suggests that the grandparent was not in a position to support the introduction of a new-born baby.

Furthermore, there can be an expectation that grandparents will care for the new child, a responsibility they may not wish to (or be in a position to) fulfil. Previous literature has identified that in multi-generational family homes, parenting boundaries can be both

a source of support and conflict (Poehlmann, 2003). Evidently, in this case, the arrival of a child disrupted the dynamics of the family home and resulted in the participant being directed into homelessness. In cases where the young parent was forced to leave the home at the request of their own parents, when asked if they would return home, most suggested that they would if permitted.

> **'I still ask can I go back but she won't let me.' Grainne, 24**

Taking these accounts into consideration, positive parental relationships in the family home of origin are of critical value to the participants. Residing in the family home of origin with their children becomes difficult when relationships are strained, and the above examples highlight the potential impact of having children while in the family home, and the consequences of relationship deterioration.

> **'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**

3.1.2 The 'Tipping Point' and Overcrowding

In the previous section, the potential impacts of a new-born baby on existing family dynamics were explored. However, as previously stated, there are cases where families are able to manage these circumstances for a period of time. However, an interesting concept emerged in the data that can be referred to as the 'tipping point'. In the case of one participant, she lived in the family home (local authority housing) for five years with one child. It was after the arrival of her second child that the tipping point was reached and the relationship with her mother deteriorated. The mother then 'forced' the participant to leave 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**

Although the participant was given a chance to live in the family home with both children, the combination of conflict between the participant in the house and the crowded environment influenced her mother's decision. With one child involved, conditions were bearable, as is evident from the fact the young family remained in the family home for five years. After having a second child, the tipping point was reached, ultimately resulting in the participant being told to leave and then having to present to local authorities as homeless. While the arrival of additional children can lead to overcrowding, this was not always the case. The tipping point specifically refers to the stress and disruption that infant children may bring to a home space which has limited capacity.

Overcrowding in the family home was a common precipitating factor for future homelessness in this study. Many of the participants came from large families in homes that were already quite crowded. According to the participants, the disorderly nature of a multi-generational home made for a chaotic family dynamic, wherein young children required further attention and space while parents and grandparents were deprived of privacy. Participants reported having to share a room with their children and other family

members who might be younger or older, with different sets of needs and lifestyles. These environments were, naturally, not ideal for raising a child, and resulted in young parents leaving (or being asked to leave) the family home to seek an environment more suitable for their children.

> **'It had to happen. It was getting too much and it wasn't fair having the baby around either. The house was getting crowded.'** Rona, 20

The decision to leave was made from necessity: 'it had to happen'. The welfare of children was the central motive for the decision to leave the family home, and this was a common thread throughout the data collected for this study. A lack of sufficient space limits opportunities to provide appropriate care for growing child(ren) and, furthermore, parenting becomes challenging in a crowded environment. Many of the participants stated that their family home of origin was in local authority housing, with some reporting that they lived in small houses that did not meet the needs of multigenerational families.

> **'There were 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

While some participants made the difficult personal decision to leave the home for the benefit of their child(ren), others were asked to leave by their parents. This reinforces the importance of the role that parental relationships play in the stability of a young parent's early housing arrangements (Tinsley and Parke, 1987). In one case, local authority policy meant that one participant was unable to remain living with her uncle because she was not a named tenant in the property.

There were also cases where the participant was not the only young parent in the house. Some participants who entered homelessness from overcrowded family homes reported that siblings were also raising children there, which was problematic.

> **'Growing up was grand but it was just when two of us started having kids it got messy.'** Elaine, 22

Multiple family units in one home was described as 'messy' and began to take its toll on all involved. Overcrowding can have a significant impact on the ability to provide for children's basic needs, and unstable and uncomfortable sleeping arrangements can lead to poor health and educational engagement (Gove, Hughes and Galle, 1979). Considering the young age of the participants in this sample, the impact of overcrowding also has implications in terms of parental engagement in employment and education.

3.1.3 Mental Health, Physical Illness and Substance Misuse of Family Members

There were families of participants who had experienced many adversities such as illness and substance dependence, and many of the participants had experienced adversity in childhood. There were also instances where a family home with a relatively stable history may have suddenly entered a period of instability due to the death of a parent, or development of a mental illness and/or substance dependence. The implications of poor mental health on daily functioning are well-documented (Schanzer et al., 2007), and the participants in this study highlighted the significant impact that their parents' mental health had on the quality of their parenting. There were several cases throughout the data set where participants stated that the deteriorating mental health of their parents prompted the need to leave the family home. One participant details his experience living with a father with a severe psychiatric diagnosis, which had further implications for his employment and, ultimately, his living situation.

> **'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

John's father's mental health condition, which intensified after his wife's sudden passing, was continually referenced by John as the reason for homelessness. The family were continually 'kicked out' of the home before getting permission to return, but the unmanaged nature of the psychiatric condition instilled fear for the safety of his wife and daughter. Ultimately, they were forced to engage with homeless services. The father's mental health also cost the participant his employment and led to homelessness for this particular family. Similarly, another participant felt obligated to leave the home due to her mother's depression, as their relationship was beginning to deteriorate, and the welfare of her children was at risk.

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

Illness can yield a crisis within a family and may cause a shift in the dynamics among family members, and this is also true for another participant who was unable to follow her mother to a relative's home because she had two children.

> **'Yeah, and then me granda got sick so [mother] had to move in with him, and we couldn't go there with the kids. So I had to go homeless'** Kate, 24

Being a young parent living in the family home of origin, this participant was not prepared for the sudden change in her living arrangements and had no other option but to present as homeless to local authorities. The dynamics of her family home were drastically altered and her status as a young parent meant that she was unable to continue living with her own mother.

Substance misuse by a number of participants' parents was also a recurring theme, which led to a departure from the family home. There were reports of parents and care-givers creating hostile environments due to their use of alcohol and/or drugs. One participant was in and out of his mother's supported accommodation and was moved around between different family members as a result of his mother's opiate dependence.

> **'In and out, auntie's, ma's, me uncle's, me cousin's, so I was going from one to another, like ... yeah, unstable.'** Oisin, 21

Another participant, who was a care leaver, left one of her foster homes due to her foster carer's use of alcohol. Furthermore, she was initially placed in care because her biological parents also struggled with substance misuse. The hostility and uncertainty surrounding such difficult family dynamics made it problematic to reside in the family home. This led to a period of unstable housing and hidden homelessness and she was eventually forced to move into her mother's bedsit with her child as a last resort. This proved to be significantly stressful, especially for the young child, and the participant was forced to present as homeless.

> **'My dad's 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

As described above, there are a percentage of the participants who experienced adversity within the family home, with parental mental health issues and/or substance misuse. Research on the impact of toxic stress on developing systems has been well-documented (Fellitti et al., 1998), and it is now recognised that this exposure creates systems that are primed to respond differently to stress. This may have very serious consequences for later life functioning (Dube et al., 2003). A trauma-informed lens, therefore, may shed light on the reasons why some parents may become labelled as 'unwilling' to engage (Lambert and Gill-Emerson, 2017). There is a growing body of evidence that highlights the vulnerability of children exposed to early adversity which is increasingly informing policy and practice.

3.2 Navigating the Housing System

For young parents experiencing homelessness, navigating the dynamics of the housing market can be a daunting process. Due to a combination of their young age and lack of experience with independent living, may not have the financial resources or necessary requirements to secure a private rented home and therefore have very limited options. This cohort is clearly at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to secure housing and exit homelessness.

3.2.1 Circumstantial Barriers to Securing Alternative Accommodation

Due to their lack of independent living skills, employment and education, there are several circumstantial barriers that arguably make it more difficult for this cohort to secure housing than other groups. Coming straight from the family home into homelessness puts them at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to compete in the housing market which, in turn, can interrupt educational commitments or impair their ability to sustain employment, all of which are vital aspects to the process of securing alternative accommodation. When there are children involved, childcare demands become more pressing when care within the family home is no longer an option.

> **'Emm, I studied childcare ... and then I started working in a crèche, last January, and then, I'm not working in a crèche now 'cos I have a baby!'** Danielle, 24

Danielle, quoted above, managed to complete her education and secure employment in the field of childcare. However, the impact of having a child at such a young age and the lack of suitable housing affected her ability to sustain the employment. As a result, she had to leave her position to care for her child. This, of course, opens the potential for financial difficulties as the participant lost her primary source of income. Some participants did not get the opportunity to enter the workforce, as having a child interrupted their education.

> **'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

As with any young person attempting to source their own housing in this current market, the participants in this study had little or no experience of independent living. This made them less desirable candidates to landlords in a very competitive market where the demand for property outweighs the availability. These young families are also disadvantaged as, without a history of independent living, they have no references from landlords, and their unstable housing situations lead to exclusion from employment and education, further increasing vulnerability and marginalisation.

> **'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

3.2.2 Competition in the Housing Market

When detailing their experiences of navigating the housing market, a recurring topic was the competition involved when attempting to secure affordable housing. These young parents were attending viewings that were also attended by long-term employed individuals with evidenced renting histories. Thus, many participants felt that their chances of a successful tenancy were already reduced when considering their lack of references or rent history. They stood in long queues to wait to view a property, sometimes with their children. Parents of young children have demands on their time, such as school pick-up, and any parent of small children would struggle to endure standing in a queue for hours with their children. The experience often left them feeling judged and dejected. There was huge frustration that despite continually attending viewings and communicating with landlords there was always rejection. Enduring this process further affected already low levels of self-esteem. It was difficult to maintain optimism and motivation in such a challenging market. The competition in the housing market was described as intense, and participants' inexperience put them at a distinct disadvantage; they just do not present as a desirable option for landlords.

> **'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

Niamh and other participants felt as young parent dependent on HAP at a disadvantage as they competed with older, employed professionals, reminded them that they were disadvantaged. The process just served to increase hopelessness and shame. So, was there any benefit in attempting to secure private rented accommodation? The participants unanimously reported that they 'never won the house' and the never-ending cycle of failure requires large investments of time and causes stress to children and parents and further feelings of worthlessness (Grotti et al., 2018).

> **'You were going to these viewings and there's, like, 30, 40 people outside them … I'm only strolling up, like, with, like, probably just a pi-, like, 1 or 2 references from, like, 2016 or something from work experience or something like that.'** Abbey, 20

Although these families are eligible for HAP, they find it difficult to compete for limited accommodation which is also increasing in cost (Hearne and Murphy, 2017). Participants suggested the possibility of HAP-specific viewings as a means of increasing their chances at securing housing, but they acknowledge that landlords have the ultimate say in who they want.

> **'I think it would be easier if, like, you know, we went to viewings that were just for HAP, like, in particular, like, because you get all these high expectations of going to this and then you walk in and people are there with full-time jobs and all their money and landlords just hand it over like.'** Rona, 22

3.2.3 Discrimination in the Housing Market

Previous research suggests that certain cohorts of people tend to be actively discriminated against in the housing market, and current findings suggest that young parents experiencing homelessness are subject to this prejudice. Participants openly acknowledged that there is a certain stigma attached to homeless young parents. Throughout the data set, participants stated that they felt significant levels of discrimination when approaching landlords, attending viewings, and even during the initial interaction with homeless services.

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 said that they felt their age and the presence of a child were perceived by landlords as unfavourable and resulted in them refusing to take them on as tenants. Their understanding of the situation was that landlords viewed children as a hindrance, and that they hold a stereotypical viewpoint of young adult lifestyles related to partying and excessive numbers of visitors to the property.

> **'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

While age discrimination has traditionally been viewed as an issue for older adults, there is an increasing recognition that young people are disadvantaged in domains such as employment, justice and housing (Grotti et al., 2018). The discriminatory views of young adults are detrimental to a young parent's chances of securing affordable housing in the private rented sector. Participants also said that landlords might view them as irresponsible, particularly if they are aware of their homeless circumstances. The participants felt that the need for HAP or rental supplements created a perceived inability to keep up with rent payments. There is a general consensus among the sample that landlords are looking for tenants who are perceived as 'reliable' and that they do not give these young parents a chance to prove themselves as reliable tenants. They are caught in a cycle of no experience, no references, and no success at securing housing.

HAP in itself served as a barrier to accessing housing. Many participants spoke of experiences where they felt dismissed by landlords and/or agents at the mere mention of HAP, while other participants explicitly stated that landlords simply would not accept HAP, that 'nobody's taking it'. It was believed by participants that the HAP scheme feeds into the 'irresponsible parent' stereotype, where the broad reluctance among landlords to facilitate the HAP scheme compounded their sense of failure. As a result, young parents are reluctant to admit that they are in the HAP scheme.

> **'I just wait to say HAP 'til last, like, that they have it like a sheet of paper, and the minute you mark, you mark HAP.'** Bea, 25

The attitude of landlords/agents towards this cohort as they seek private rented accommodation was described by the participants as dismissive. Instances included that they were told they would hear back from a landlord following a viewing to either offer them successful tenancy or tell them otherwise. However, this was not the case, and the lack of follow-up contact was perceived simply as a dismissal or rejection of the young parents.

> **'Now when you're put in emergency accommodation you're approved for HAP and you start going to every viewing under the sun and they'll "call ya back", they're not gonna call ya back. I think it's useless'.** John, 22

Participants reported that there was a paradoxical nature to the HAP scheme. It was felt that the HAP scheme acted as a source of discrimination in the private rented market. While it is illegal to discriminate against HAP, in practice it still happens. Although there have been legal challenges that have successfully highlighted this practice, participants reported that discrimination against HAP tenants still continues and is very difficult to prove. Even though the rental subsidies are guaranteed on a monthly basis, there is still a perceived reluctance of landlords to support the scheme.

> **'I just don't get it. You're guaranteed your money, like, it doesn't make sense. I'm giving you what you want.'** Sophie, 22

> **'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

The above quote from Fiona exemplifies an almost overwhelming consensus among participants that the HAP scheme was not a realistic long-term housing solution. This cohort is already at a distinct socio-economic disadvantage when it comes to securing housing. They have very limited options in securing housing, and the prevalence of discrimination in the private market for these young families is extremely challenging. Local authority housing is hard to attain, so these young parents are presented with very limited housing options. Overall, discrimination hinders their potential to exit homelessness and acts as a significant barrier to securing a permanent home.

3.3 Uncertainty and Influence on Perceived Housing Options

Most new parents who set up home for the first time have significant supports around them to aid the transition into this new chapter of increased demands and responsibilities. For the young families in this study there are fractured familial supports and limited financial supports. Trying to establish a stable family life for the first time in the context of homelessness at such a young age creates a future shrouded in uncertainty. In this theme, the participants' perceived housing options are discussed.

3.3.1 Lack of Options and Growing Dependency in Emergency Accommodation

The barriers to private rented and social housing experienced by the young parents in this study means that they have limited opportunity to improve their current situation. Despite an acceptance that their current living situations are difficult, residing in hotels and emergency accommodation are seen by many as the only viable option available to them. Of course not all emergency settings are the same and this can change for a family over time. Participants who were 'self-accommodating' (i.e. having to source their own emergency accommodation) were at a particular disadvantage and were relieved to get an extended stay in a hotel or other emergency accommodation.

The fear of finding a home and losing that home, of having to start the process again and the impact of the instability on children generated high levels of anxiety and mistrust about the viability of private rented accommodation as an appropriate, long-term, stable option. As such waiting in emergency accommodation was viewed as a viable option for some parents despite uncomfortable living conditions, given the precarious nature of the housing market.

Though participants struggled with the unknown in terms of how long they would have to remain in emergency accommodation or hotels before they were able to secure a home.

> **'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

3.3.2 Housing Policies and Young Parents

Of course, despite the challenges, both the family support workers and the young parents themselves are working towards exiting homelessness. It is worth noting that HAP housing is viewed as an assisted means of securing housing for homeless young parents. However, most of the participants in this study viewed their current accommodation as a more secure, long-term alternative. It was important to explore the reasons as to why this HAP option is not perceived as a realistic long-term option for young parents. Even in the event that a landlord does accept HAP, the sustainability of this option was a key concern for these parents.

> **'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 or 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

This reluctance stems from the uncertainty surrounding their future, as many participants stated that a HAP lease is a short-term solution to a long-term problem. They reported that the owner can sell the house at any time and participants fear they will have to endure the process of becoming homeless again. Stability for children was reported as the central concern in this case.

> **'I don't know. HAP to me is scary because I think, like, if a landlord just wanted to take the house back, then am I coming back here again?'** Danielle, 24

The paradox for this cohort is that although they identify as homeless, their current residence in emergency accommodation is regarded as the most 'stable' option for them due to lack of alternative options. The instability of HAP and the lack of local authority or social housing were the core reasons for this lack of options. Of course, rough sleeping was also identified and was, as expected, the least desirable option, which further bolstered their current emergency accommodation setting as a viable but temporary solution. The

participants' existence is compressed into short-term living with very little possibility of future planning or goal-setting. This influences almost all of their choices, including how they make decision around HAP. As previously stated, concern for the welfare of their children above their own was a priority.

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

3.3.3 Interaction with Services

The participants' experience with services often fuelled their feelings of uncertainty. Participants expressed a desire for further information, and the uncertainty about their situation adds to their frustration and influences their perceived housing options.

> **'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

There were a number of cases where participants stated that their key worker changed suddenly and without prior notice. One participant expressed irritation at the fact that his family were not informed of the change, but he was also worried that his new key worker would not have a firm understanding of his family's needs, an understanding which had been fostered over time with the previous key worker. The lack of support and information also influenced his interaction with services as he felt that he was not being adequately informed of his options despite attending regular meetings with key workers.

> **'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

> **'I keep going to these meetings every month and nothing is happening. It's the same thing every week, a waste of time and they tell me nothing. So I stopped going.'** Tom, 23

One participant detailed the positive relationship she has with her key worker, and her engagement with the services reflects this positivity.

> **'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

Overall, there were mixed views of different aspects of services. It would appear from service users' accounts that there is frustration about the lack of options and the lack of information and support provided. But a positive relationship with workers in services who are in tune with their needs has a positive impact on the overall engagement.

> **'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 diverse range of pathways into homelessness. They suffered housing deprivation and overcrowding in their own family homes, and, in some cases, adversity and trauma during childhood. The catalyst for entering homelessness for these young parents was characterised by these underlying processes of disadvantage 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 after having a first (or second) child. While there may be some differences in their pathways into homelessness, there are similarities in their experiences of navigating the housing system.

These young parents had little recourse to compete in a private rented market; a sector which favours those with proven stable tenancies in the private rented sector and appropriate references. The private rented sector was not seen as a potential route out for these families due to the barriers they faced in both accessing and sustaining a home in a highly competitive housing market. They remained in homelessness for often lengthy periods as they felt largely locked out of the housing market and felt that social housing – which offered security of tenure – was the most preferable option to carve a route to stable family life for them and their children. This is a symptom of an extremely limited landscape of housing choices for these young parents. Their pursuit of security of tenure came with a cost however, as many of the parents were willing to undergo significant hardship by living in emergency accommodation for long periods of time.

Chapter 4

Stakeholders' Experience with this Cohort

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis carried out on data gathered in stakeholder interviews. Seven stakeholders took part in interviews. These interviews were shorter in length than the family interviews, and discussions centred on the young families experiencing homelessness as viewed from the service perspective. The interview content was generally consistent across participants. However, there were contrasting opinions and statements regarding what available options are best suited to young parents. As already stated in the methodology chapter, the seven stakeholders in the sample 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.

Themes	Sub-Themes
Young Families Entering Homelessness	4.1.1 The Dynamics of the Family Home 4.1.2 How Young Parents Navigate the Housing System 4.1.3 Support Policy and Implications for Parents Entering Homelessness
Housing Options from the Service Perspective	4.2.1 The Family Home of Origin 4.2.2 Housing Assistant Payment (HAP) Scheme 4.2.3 Implementation of 'Transitional' Housing
Support Implementation	4.3.1 Education and Awareness 4.3.2 Perceptions of Maturity and Expectations of Young Parents

Table 6: Emerging themes and sub-themes from stakeholder interviews

4.1 Young Families Entering Homelessness

4.1.1 The Dynamics of the Family Home

Service providers showed a detailed knowledge of the dynamics of a difficult family home and how the onset of parenthood might eventually lead to homelessness. In common with the family interviewees, the stakeholders identified family conflict between young parents and their own mothers and fathers as a key precipitating factor for homelessness. 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 caring for 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)**

Echoing the views expressed in the family interviews, some stakeholders identified the tension arising over parenting duties and feelings that the grandparents are interfering too much in the raising of the child. The service perspective here offers an understanding of this tension by relating it to boundaries within the family home. Sometimes there is a difference in expectation about the levels of grandparent involvement; these may relate to childcare responsibilities or to expectations of privacy, which have also been identified elsewhere in the research literature (Poehlmann, 2003). In such cases, mediation might be a productive intervention, with conflict resolution providing the young family with better options than leaving the family home and presenting as homeless.

4.1.2 How Young Parents Navigate the Housing System

All stakeholders interviewed were also in unanimous agreement that these young parents are a specific subgroup who is at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to securing housing in either the social or private rented sectors.

In relation to social housing, due to their young age, this cohort will automatically be a low priority on the waiting list, which broadly operates on the basis of 'time on list' and is slow moving. However, as previously noted in the family interviews, many of the young people do not understand the realities of housing list waiting times and have expectations of more rapid housing allocations, until their experience shows them otherwise.

> **'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**

Navigating an unfamiliar system can be difficult for young parents, especially at such a young age and without the necessary supports.

Stakeholder participants recognise that accessing affordable private housing also poses significant difficulty for young parents who may not have full-time or even part-time employment. Effectively, the private rented market is closed off to a lot of young

parents because landlords see them as unattractive tenants in a highly competitive commercial market. Service providers offer a view of the stigma that is often attached to this cohort, as they are working in front-line services and thus have direct experience of the challenges experienced by them.

Because these families have no history of renting, they have no landlord references, which is a significant a barrier to obtaining private rented accommodation. Certain landlords may also be reluctant to let to families with children, and in particular, young homeless families.

> **'References are a huge block to accessing housing … Landlords would feel safer letting to a more settled family.'** Eddie, Homeless NGO

There were some differences between the perspectives of statutory and voluntary services and, additionally, between workers with direct client experience and those in more administrative and/or management positions with no direct client contact.

While the young parents and NGO stakeholders felt that they were the victims of generalisations and stereotypes (which assumed they would not take care of the house and would be having parties and receiving visitors), some of the stakeholders tended to be more understanding of the pragmatic and commercial realities of the private rental sector.

> **'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)

It is clear these young families experience significant barriers in accessing the private rented sector and that it is quite unstable for those who do access it. This is the result both of prejudice and the consequence of commercial decisions of landlords to favour tenants that they see as presenting the least risk. Some stakeholders concluded that this means that the private rented sector is not a realistic secure option for these families, while others felt that this barrier could be partially overcome by helping young parents to upskill to help them to navigate the housing market and to compete for private rented accommodation.

4.1.3 Support Policy and Implications for Parents Entering Homelessness

The importance of support for young parents was emphasised throughout stakeholder conversations. Their support needs are not confined to housing, as the impact of becoming homeless has a significant effect on their well-being. There are growing concerns among stakeholders that these young families do not receive the support they require and that needs are being overlooked in the commercial nature of the housing market. Support/key workers can provide this support, but not all families have an allocated support worker[5] and the support needs of these young families may not be fully provided for.

[5] As of October 2018, of the 1,320 families who are homeless in Dublin, over 400 do not have an allocated support worker.

> **'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)

Each participant interviewed in this study had a key worker assigned to his/her family. The benefits of this were acknowledged by the stakeholders, such as assistance in linking in with services that help with caring for a child, but some of the stakeholders were concerned that many young parents are neglecting to look after their own needs. The interviews with parents highlighted that their children's needs were the central motive behind many of the decisions they made. This can result in them neglecting their own health needs. From the service perspective in this case, the health of the parents themselves are clearly a priority, and frameworks should be implemented in accommodation centres to reflect this need.

> **'Are these parents bringing their children for mental health check-ups? Are they taking medical care of themselves? Are there many young parents and their children falling through the cracks?'**
> Caroline, Support Service (beyond housing)

Young parents and stakeholders both mentioned concerns in relation to consistency of support/key workers, as many young people have changes in keyworkers as they transition from homelessness to housing. It was reported that, as they move through the different stages, they are assigned new keyworkers with, at times, poor transition processes and incomplete and delayed handovers. It was suggested by both young people and professionals that the same keyworker should support the young family from intake to homelessness right through to supporting stability in housing.

4.2 Housing Options from the Service Perspective

There was a general concern amongst stakeholders that, due to their situation and struggle for housing, the long-term effects of residing in an emergency accommodation setting were being overlooked. Of course, professionals in this line of work have witnessed the effects of this on different families over time and have a practice-based understanding of the best housing options for this cohort.

4.2.1 The Family Home of Origin

Where appropriate, the family home was identified as the ideal housing option for young parents. If young parents can remain in the family home of origin, they can potentially avoid emergency accommodation and also retain natural support structures. As previously stated, however, this can also prove to be a source of conflict, as the parenting styles of the young parent and their own mother or father may clash. As relationship breakdown with parents is a common pathway into homelessness for this cohort, support services could provide a mediation process to 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

Professionals in this line of work acknowledge that remaining in the family home may impact on the development of living skills, which are crucial to living independently. Nevertheless, some considered it a preferred option as a temporary measure while a young adult settles into their new role as a parent, as it provides a safe environment for their child or children.

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. The lack of options for these young families with limited finances are evident when they are encouraged to stay in their family home rather than pursue the natural transition of moving to their own home and having a space for their own family.

4.2.2 Housing Assistant Payment (HAP) Scheme

While HAP may be one of the most common exit route for families leaving homelessness, the findings of this current study indicate that it is problematic for younger parents. Stakeholders expressed conflicting views on the HAP scheme. Many 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

While the above stakeholders state that young families have no option but to consider HAP given the lack of alternative housing options, this contrasts with the barriers already identified by young families and other service providers, e.g. the need for references, no housing history, and socio-economic disadvantage in a competitive market.

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 as 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)

Although many young parents might be HAP approved, they are not guaranteed a home and could be waiting even longer. The HAP scheme aims to assist young families in preventing and exiting homelessness, but it cannot function for these young families when there are few realistic housing options available for them to access.

The constant waiting in homeless accommodation tends to facilitate the attitude that the family's current residence is a preferable option for the foreseeable future until they might access a more permanent housing solution. Again, with concerns about the long-term effects of residing in homeless accommodation for extended periods of time, which is described as 'very deskilling', this is not ideal. 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.

There is no consistent policy about the payment of 'rent' across emergency accommodation, with rent contributions being collected in some services and not in others. One stakeholder suggested the introduction of some consistent form of rental payment in emergency accommodation through which a family could demonstrate rent history to support them accessing private rental housing.

> **'Families in hub accommodation could pay a small percentage of rent to get them into the habit of paying bills, and giving them a reference with a history of paying rent or managing a household.'** Anne, Homeless NGO

4.2.3 'Transitional' Housing

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 more 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)

It is not entirely clear what the stakeholders are proposing, as the concept of 'transitional housing' has been used to describe a range of different housing policy interventions. '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.

4.3 Support Implementation

Stakeholders who were interviewed were asked to identify areas of support necessary for these young parents to increase their chances of exiting homelessness and improve their quality of life. There were common themes across all suggestions, and most of the recommendations were based on the concepts of supporting upskilling and greater information.

4.3.1 Education and Awareness

It was suggested that families need to be told exactly what their options and rights are so they can be better able to navigate out of homelessness as quickly as possible. There was a perception amongst stakeholders that there is at times a disconnect between what families hope for and what is realistic in the current housing crisis.

It was also suggested that families be given more opportunities to avail of their housing rights and be given support with advocacy when required. Stakeholders provided examples of situations where landlords evicted tenants to move in relatives.

> **'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

As this study relates to young families who had left their family home of origin, none of them had experience of such evictions. However, the pervasive awareness of these issues is seen as creating a context where the general lack of knowledge about rights and low self-esteem among this cohort can, evidently, impact on the choices made. Supporting them during these times and informing them on how to negotiate with landlords would help in sustaining housing.

> **'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

4.3.2 Perceptions of Maturity and Expectations of Young Parents

According to some of the professionals interviewed, families require more realistic information on their housing options. Without the appropriate support, 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)

Falling out of family support is clearly a massive issue and very damaging to the quality of life for young parents. The service providers aim to ensure that family members do remain supported throughout the process of exiting homelessness. In cases of hidden homelessness, this can be difficult. In these situations, many of the families transition between friends and family before presenting to emergency accommodation. These

family units may slip through the cracks of a formal support system and which has implications for preventative measures.

> **'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

According to one professional, some younger families 'exhibit a sense of entitlement, a big differentiating factor when comparing them to older families with life experience. Much of this entitlement comes down to a lack of understanding, or their upbringing'. Supporting families and giving them information on arrival was identified as being very important. 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 the interview transcripts and reflect a framework of understanding that could be considered problematic.

Systems that adopt a 'developmental framework' by which to view their young service users would use terms that are less derogatory. It would view them as emerging from adolescence with all of the characteristics that are normal for this stage. It has been well-documented in the literature that young people struggle when they transition straight into adult services at aged 18 (Reiss, Gibson and Walker, 2005; Stroud et al., 2015). The period between the ages of 18 and 25 can be difficult in any circumstances. It is a period where full adult rights and responsibilities are in place but additional support may still be needed. For young people who face the twin challenges of having recently become parents and becoming homeless, this transition can be particularly complex. There is a growing case for redefining services to create distinct young adult services for ages 18–25. This acknowledges that this group have adult rights and responsibilities but are still developing and have a genuine need for intense key working support to assist them to appropriately utilise adult services.

Summary

The professionals interviewed in this study shared the same understanding of the pathways into homelessness as the young parents themselves. There was a strong view that more could be done, where it was safe, to support these young people to remain in the family home of origin while waiting for their own home, rather than seeing them spend long periods in emergency accommodation. This may require mediation or other support services if it is to be viable.

There was also strong recognition that these young families, who have come from their home of origin, are a distinct group among homeless families and need specific supports. Some stakeholders used derogatory and unsympathetic language to describe these needs ('immature' and 'entitled'). The development needs of this still maturing cohort may not be fully understood by the system and not all families receive support. The struggle associated with transitioning from child to adult services in late adolescence and early adulthood is similar here to that documented in the literature in areas such as medicine, social work and justice.

There was recognition across the stakeholders that access to social housing for this cohort was less available than many of the families themselves expected. However, there were different views about the role of HAP and the private rented sector, with some stakeholders taking a pragmatic view that, as it the only route available, everything should be done to support families to avail of it. Other stakeholders emphasised the practical and prejudicial barriers that make this option inaccessible to and insecure for these families.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

This cohort of newly formed families experiencing homelessness has been, to date, under-researched and, for this reason, policy and service responses may not be appropriate or sufficient for their needs. The study clearly demonstrates a lack of housing options for young parents who face multiple barriers in accessing secure, affordable housing both in social housing and in the competitive private rental market. Both young people and stakeholders cited multiple barriers in accessing affordable housing for them and their children. In the absence of housing, their lives became more strained with their family and natural supports, they remained in emergency accommodation, and the well-being of them and their children was negatively impacted.

Many young parents described a sense of hopelessness as they try to compete in a highly competitive private rental market. While research has demonstrated that HAP can be useful for older adults (e.g. Haran and O'Siochrú, 2017), it appears that HAP is a less useful option for young adults. The range of barriers that these families experience in accessing private rented accommodation (e.g. lack of available properties, landlord perceptions that they are unreliable tenants) and the known insecurity of the sector makes this the least preferred option. Multiple attempts to secure private rental accommodation with HAP ending with repeated failure. This had a significantly impact on motivation and self-esteem.

The 'time served' basis of the social housing list means that for many of these young families, access to social housing is a long-distant prospect. As a consequence, some of the parents 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 dependent or, possibly, institutionalised from living in emergency accommodation.

What was crucial to these young families was what they saw as the needs and well-being of their children. Without exception, behind every decision made in relation to housing – whether to remain in emergency accommodation or to return to a family member – was the well-being of children. This is of relevance in responding to the problem of young parents experiencing homelessness in terms of providing them with routes out of homelessness that provide a better and more secure option for them.

In conclusion, the research helps us to understand the 'landscape of choice' for these young vulnerable parents. The sense of hopelessness reported in the study is based on real lived experience as they find themselves at the back of the queue in both the private and social rented sectors. Repeated failed efforts to find a new home can significantly impact on motivation and self-esteem levels. Better designed and resourced measures to help these families remain in their home of origin for longer would be beneficial for some of the families, but not for all. The lack of any real options which would provide a degree of stability for them and their children mean that many of the families feel that the only thing that their future holds is a longer stay in emergency accommodation until such time as a more sustainable solution emerges.

Even given the scale of the homeless crisis, and the range of families and individuals who have significant needs, it is possible to offer these young families and their children better choices and a better future:

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, within the context of Rebuilding Ireland, is urgently needed and would provide a framework to respond to the specific needs of young homeless parents.
- **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. Other policy changes – such as access to key worker support, local authority tenancy regulations and allocations policies may need to be adjusted to support this goal. Remaining or returning to the family home of origin is not the solution in every case. An extension of a skilled voluntary mediation services needs to be recognised as distinct from existing policies of 'gatekeeping' to put pressure on families. Successful services using skilled mediation 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 may help such families to avoid homelessness. The campaign would highlight the reality of the limited choices within the system and the preventative supports that exist. 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. Homeless organisations should develop more effective policies to inform and support families where changes in key managers are unavoidable.
- **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. There are long waiting lists for access to a child support worker, even where the child has been assessed as needing such support. As a matter of urgency, all children who are assessed as needing child support workers should have access to this support.
- **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.

- **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.
- **Creating a 'track record' for families in emergency accommodation.** 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 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.
- **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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Appendix 1

Template for Interview Schedule with Young Parents Experiencing Homelessness

1 What age are you?

- Are you a single parent?
- How many children do you have?
- Have you got a housing case manager/key worker?
- What type of housing was your family home?

2 Can you tell me about yourself and your journey?

- Growing up in the family home.
- Events and pathways leading into homelessness.
- Interaction with services.
- Length of time in current accommodation.

3 If I were to ask you about the last stable home you had, what would that have been?

4 Can you talk about your experience in the housing market?

5 What would you require to assist you in those situations?

6 What options do you feel are available to you going forward?

7 Can you talk to me a little about the impact of homelessness?

8 How do you think you could be supported better?

- Key workers
- Childcare

9 Any other comments?

Appendix 2

Template for Interview Schedule Stakeholders

1. Can you tell me about your role?
2. What do you think is the biggest reason for young families entering homelessness?
3. What difficulties do young parent families present (and how they differ from others)?
4. What challenges do you see young families facing when it comes to accessing services?
   - Why do you think they face these challenges?
   - How could these barriers be reduced?
5. What are the most appropriate housing options for this group?
6. Do you see this cohort move back and forth between homelessness and their families of origin?
7. How do you think services can best support this cohort?
8. Any other comments?



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