
A Comment

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Introduction

When, in 2007, my organisation, Thames Reach, a London-based charity helping homeless and vulnerable people to find decent homes, build supportive relationships and lead fulfilling lives, was invited to participate in the FOR-HOME longitudinal study into the resettlement outcomes of homeless people, there was enormous enthusiasm and eagerness to fully contribute. This was matched by the staff groups of the other selected charities: Framework, St Anne’s, St Mungo’s Centrepoint and Broadway. For homelessness organisations, longitudinal research of this type is extremely difficult to undertake alone and without additional funding because of the amount of resources needed to successfully track individuals through their often complicated resettlement journey. For cash-strapped charities the necessity of assisting increasing numbers of people entering our services and the requirement to provide output information for commissioners always takes priority. The researchers, Maureen Crane, Tony Warnes and Sarah Coward have an impressive track record of exploring, with academic robustness, key areas of interest in the area of homelessness and this enhanced our confidence that this could be ground-breaking research.

The FOR-HOME report, published in 2011 has had a significant impact on the work of the participating charities and other organisations working with homeless people. As a practitioner in the field, it is a source of frustration that research of this quality and richness does not translate readily into changes in delivery practice and service commissioning. The linked paper produced for the *European Journal of Homelessness* by Crane *et al* (2012) focuses primarily on the association between aspects of preparation for independent living experienced by the homeless cohort, and the consequent outcomes of their resettlement. The paper sets out a detailed background of the policies and approaches to rehabilitation and resettlement, stretching back to the 1970s. This response focuses on two particular areas that are considered in the article: (1) the proposition that the duration of stay in temporary accommodation is a major influence on resettlement outcomes, and (2) the role played by resettlement and tenancy support staff and the impact of other factors and interventions.

The Link between Stays in Temporary Accommodation and Resettlement Outcomes

The link between stays in temporary accommodation and strong resettlement outcomes appears to be one of the most unambiguous findings that emerged from the *For Homes* study. For provider organisations such as Thames Reach, influenced by the pathways approach developed by some of the more progressive local authorities, it was a surprising conclusion. The pathways approach encourages swift progress through different forms of temporary accommodation – assessment centre, hostel, second stage housing – with the aim of ensuring that, as quickly as is reasonable, the client is provided with long-term, settled accommodation. The pathways approach is not rigidly linear and allows, for example, a move into self-contained accommodation from a hostel if the client's assessment and support plan indicates that there is a good chance that they will be able to settle successfully.

The researchers concluded that there was a strong association between the use of temporary accommodation prior to resettlement with successfully sustaining independent accommodation and, additionally, noted that 'the likelihood of retaining a tenancy increased with the duration of stay in the pre-resettlement accommodation, from 67 percent among those who were resident for three months or less, to 100 percent so housed for 25-36 months'(Crane *et al*, 2012, p.31).

This conclusion is of particular interest because of the apparently contradictory statistics which suggest that hostels, (though less starkly, shared 'semi-independent' accommodation comprising smaller units) have relatively poor outcomes, notably around sustaining people in the accommodation for long enough to achieve changes in behaviour, reduction in substance misuse and stability. Instead the statistics create a picture of a demoralising 'churn' of people between hostels or shelters and the street, sometimes interlaced with short spells in prison or hospital.

In London, the information compiled by outreach teams working with rough sleepers is submitted onto a database called the Combined Homeless and Information Network (CHAIN) and reported on a bi-monthly and annual basis. The profile of the rough sleeping group closely aligns with the *For Home* cohort.

The latest annual figures released in June 2013, cover the year 2012-13. In this period there were a total of 1930 departures from the hostels for rough sleepers monitored via CHAIN. 29 per cent of departures were negative; that is the resident abandoned the hostel or was evicted. A further 25 per cent of departures were 'transfers' to other hostels, hospital, detoxification centre or bed and breakfast. Only around four in ten of residents moved on to something more long-term and settled, including returning to the family home. Given this reality of frequent abandonments and evictions, sideways moves and general turbulence, it is hardly

surprising that some resettlement workers and hostel staff are determined to make stays in hostels as short as possible and to focus on resettlement plans that achieve ‘move on’ within three to six months.

And yet the FOR-HOME research appears to endorse longer stays in hostels and implicitly counsel against rapid re-housing into longer term, more independent accommodation. What can account for this apparent contradiction? One possible explanation for the strength of the association between a lengthy stay in temporary accommodation and sustained resettlement outcomes could be that the residents who are able to sustain themselves in a hostel or other shared temporary accommodation have lower needs and greater resilience than those who are continuously being evicted or abandoning. In other words, the factors leading to success in sustaining independent accommodation are less to do with effective resettlement preparation and more strongly correlate to the personal stamina, resilience and relatively un-chaotic lifestyle of the resident.

However, in response to this possibility, the article emphasises that ‘there were no significant differences in duration of stay [in temporary accommodation preceding resettlement] by age, mental health or substance misuse’ (*ibid.*, p.25). Of course, these factors do not automatically translate into levels of need, but the implication is that there is no obvious sifting of the cohort based on lower support needs, which would account for the correlation between longevity in temporary accommodation and sustained resettlement.

At the risk of sounding too much like the archetypal researcher sensing an opportunity, this is an area that could benefit from further scrutiny and investigation. The FOR- HOME study evidences in the broadest sense what the key elements are in terms of successful preparation. It shows, for example, that there is a strong association between preparatory engagement in employment, training and education (ETE), and continued purposeful commitment to, and progress in, these areas and that this continuity positively influences resettlement sustainment. The study demonstrates too that providing more assistance in the management of personal finances is likely to be a crucial factor in improving tenancy sustainment rates.

But these are broad-brush conclusions and detailed investigation of what aspects of pre-resettlement preparation most contributes towards sustained resettlement would allow not only for more detailed analysis of, for example, precisely what type of employment-related support made the most difference, but also allow some exploration of the more speculative recommendations arising from the FOR- HOME research, such as the efficacy of peer support as a model that can improve sustainment outcomes. Clarification of what works best with some cost benefit analysis

accompanying the investigation would be particularly useful at a time when recessionary pressures are leading to the return of basic short-stay shelter provision in many parts of the country.

The Role Played by Resettlement and Tenancy Support Staff and the Impact of other Factors and Interventions

The FOR-HOME study is emphatic in its conclusion that resettlement workers and tenancy support staff contribute significantly to the achievement of positive resettlement outcomes. Typically the task of the resettlement or tenancy support workers commences prior to resettlement taking place, and in the most effective services, there will be a close working relationship between them and hostel staff.

The study found that the main assistance provided by tenancy support workers was in the practical areas of helping establish welfare benefit claims, sorting out rent and utility payments, tackling problems with the condition of the accommodation and, to a lesser degree, providing emotional support. Interestingly, and perhaps challengingly, given the prioritising of these areas of support, the article notes that there was no significant relationship between training received in the area of undertaking household tasks before resettlement and managing a home after moving, though training in paying bills was identified as being a key preparatory training area.

Yet there appear to be other areas of equal, or of more importance, in terms of ensuring successful outcomes including, as noted earlier, support in the area of ETE. And one area that, regrettably, was not covered in any detail in the article, but features significantly in the study itself, is the role of relatives and friends as a source of support and sustenance.

Whilst the study concluded that there was no association between seeing a relative regularly and tenancy sustainment, it notes that 81 per cent of respondents were in touch with at least one family member or relative at resettlement and that this increased to 84 percent over the next 15/18 months. The study also showed that many resettled people received both practical help and emotional support from family and friends. For those respondents who had ceased to be tenants at 15 to 18 months, those with no regular family contact were more likely to return to a hostel or the streets, while those who had contact were more likely to stay with relatives. It appears that, at the very least, contact with family and friends prevent a return to rough sleeping.

Taking into account the significance of ETE and areas of unstructured, non-professional support, there appears to be some evidence that the priorities of resettlement and tenancy support workers need to be re-ordered. This would entail a shift

away from the practical orthodoxies of focusing on managing the flat, welfare benefit calculations and rent payment, towards helping people increase their employability, strengthen their social networks and seek ways of sustaining themselves, without needing to remain reliant on professional support staff. Given the likelihood of further pressures on commissioners’ budgets and a reduction in funding for supported housing, there is also a pragmatic driver that should encourage reflection on creating a more sustainable support model based on enabling clients to develop organic structures that reduce reliance on sometimes precarious formal support services.

Conclusion

The article restricts itself to analysing the familiar, traditional areas selected by the researchers and collaborating organisations that are associated with preparation for independent living. Yet there are tantalising glimpses of wider societal influences that can impact on resettlement which are covered in the FOR-HOME report, notably in the chapter entitled ‘Settledness, Morale and Aspirations’ that tentatively explores the quality of resettlement measured through, for example, wellbeing that it would be useful to interrogate in more detail. It would be enormously beneficial to dig deeper into these areas as we continue to track the resettled cohort and collectively seek solutions that don’t simply prevent a reoccurrence of homelessness but help people live satisfying and enriched lives. It is highly likely, in my view, that to achieve this higher objective the core of the support will need to be provided by natural, mutually beneficial social networks rather than via funded support services for the homeless.