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# Family Homelessness in Ireland: The Importance of Research Design in Evidence-Based Policy-Making

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- **Abstract\_** *Ireland is currently in the grip of a homeless crisis, with consistently high numbers of families presenting as homeless to their local authority each month – notably in Dublin. There are two sources of published research on the characteristics and trends in family homelessness in the capital: (i) a national homeless organisation who works directly with families and (ii) the lead statutory local authority in the response to homelessness in Dublin (drawing, respectively, on bespoke survey data and administrative data). While there are considerable parallels across the two suites of publications, the findings diverge significantly in presenting the ‘causes of homelessness’. By drawing on unpublished secondary analysis conducted on the homeless organisation’s survey data, this research note outlines how the divergence in the findings is closely related to a question of research design. The paper argues that the dynamics of homelessness – and the protracted and unpredictable accommodation transitions that can precede entry into emergency accommodation – need to be embedded into the collection and analysis of homelessness data. Without this consideration, published research and data can run the risk of providing a misleading understanding of the root causes of homelessness.*
- **Keywords\_** *family homelessness, social policy, evidence-based policy, research and data*

## Introduction: Available Evidence on Family Homelessness in Ireland

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Since 2014, there has been an unprecedented increase in rates of homelessness in Ireland, most notably in Dublin (and increasingly in other urban areas). While increases in homelessness have been noted across all groups, cases of homelessness among families have risen sharply. In July 2014, there were 344 homeless families across the country (79% of whom were living in Dublin). By March 2020, this number stood at 1 488 families, representing a 333% increase (Department of Housing, 2020). Local authorities initially accommodated the majority of families in hotels and Bed & Breakfast facilities across the city – at considerable expense to the Irish taxpayer (during 2019, for example, a total of €170 million was spent on emergency accommodation in Dublin alone, of which €80.16 million was paid to private providers or hotel and B&Bs<sup>1</sup>). Over time, congregate homeless facilities or ‘family hubs’ have expanded to respond to the growing problem. The monthly publication of stock data relating to homeless figures receives consistent media attention and homelessness and housing dominate the political debate across local and national elections campaigns (with the discussion concentrating particularly on the roofless population and homelessness among families). Dedicated research studies on the nature of this worsening homelessness crisis took time to emerge and tend to focus on the impact of homelessness on parents and their children (see Share and Hennessy, 2017; Walsh and Harvey, 2017; Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

In 2016, there was an urgent need for timely research and data publications that can speak to the key drivers of the crisis *as it unfolds*. Initially, when the numbers of families presenting as homeless began to increase, there was only stock data publicly available, which captured trends in numbers and limited demographic profile details. However, there was a vacuum of reliable data capturing the causes of family homelessness. The absence of data can result in the circulation of anecdotal hearsay and may also result in poorly-designed services – particularly around homelessness prevention. It is in this context that Focus Ireland – a national organisation supporting those experiencing homelessness across Ireland – invested resources into collecting targeted survey data with families who were presenting as homeless. This data collection continued on a quarterly basis from 2016 to 2017 (Gambi *et al.*, 2018), followed by a larger cross-sectional analysis of families supported by the Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team in 2018 (Long *et al.*, 2019). These initiatives resulted in a total of 534 surveys across a 2.5 year period.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure – which was up 19% from the previous year – was published by the media outlet Journal.ie reporting the details released upon a Freedom of Information request. The same report also revealed that one hotel alone received between 4 and 5 million euro during 2019. See: <https://www.thejournal.ie/homeless-dublin-hotels-cost-5017050-Feb2020/>

The Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) subsequently began publishing (bi-annually) an analysis of administrative data on family homelessness collected across four local authorities in the Dublin region between 2016-2018.

Both of these datasets offered an insight into the causes of family homelessness in Dublin. However, they also have some fundamental differences that are worthy of close consideration, as these differences undoubtedly impact on how policy-makers understand family homelessness. The following research note aims to unpack the research design underlying each dataset and considers how the design yields divergent findings. The following text will also draw from unpublished secondary cluster analysis of the Focus Ireland data set, which provides additional clarity on the housing histories of families entering homelessness. Ultimately, this research note seeks to highlight the importance for close consideration to research design in the collection of homelessness data to ensure effective policy-planning and targeted service delivery.

## **Two Studies of Causes of Homelessness in Dublin: What are the Differences?**

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Both the DRHE<sup>2</sup> and Focus Ireland provide published materials on the causes of family homelessness through data collected with families soon after presenting as homeless. While these studies may have similar objectives in understanding the nature of family homelessness in Dublin, the DRHE draws from administrative data collected at point of initial assessment when families present as homeless while Focus Ireland conducts telephone surveys with families. Significantly, the two bodies of evidence differ in their conceptualisation of 'reasons for homelessness'. The DRHE presents 'last living situation' in determining causes of homelessness, while Focus Ireland records the previous four living situations before homelessness to determine the root cause of the loss of a family's *last stable home*. The implications of this in terms of interpreting 'headline' findings of both studies are considerable. First, however, it is worth further clarifying the data sources indicating the causes of family homelessness in both research initiatives.

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<sup>2</sup> The Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) has responsibility for coordinating responses to homelessness on behalf of the four Dublin Local Authorities. It provides the placement service for all persons in emergency accommodation and publishes Dublin's homeless figures. It has gathered official homelessness data since 2014 through the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS).

On the one hand, the DRHE produces a series of reports<sup>3</sup> on family homelessness drawing on administrative data recorded by the four local authorities in the Dublin Region – i.e. the initial assessment forms filled out with the families when presenting as homeless, and the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS)<sup>4</sup>. The DRHE captures a single primary reason for homelessness – which is referred to as the ‘last living situation’ (Morrin, 2019). The DRHE began recording a primary reason for homelessness in January 2016 and updated this section in May 2018 by replacing the original open-ended question with a list of the most common reasons for family homelessness. Across these reports, the DRHE data captures the totality of the families newly entering homelessness over the time period.

On the other hand, Focus Ireland’s studies on family homelessness are published through its ‘Insights into Family Homelessness Series’<sup>5</sup>, drawing on survey data that has been collected quarterly by Focus Ireland since March 2016. Respondents consist of a proportion of all families entering homelessness in the Dublin Region that are being supported by Focus Ireland homeless services (note: in the corresponding time, Focus Ireland was the largest provider of services for families experiencing homelessness in Dublin). Questions pertaining to the last four accommodations are the central component of the surveys – including length of time spent in each accommodation, self-reported primary reason for leaving each accommodation, and tenure type (including details around rent supplement assistance). This information sheds light on two principle areas of insights: families’ housing histories; and the triggers or events which resulted in the families’ loss of their previous four accommodations. Thus it seeks to uncover respondents’ *last stable*<sup>6</sup> home, which may not necessarily coincide with their last living situation (Gambi *et al.*, 2018). Regularly, families’ last accommodation in the period before entering emergency accommodation consisted of one or more informal temporary living

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<sup>3</sup> These reports are published both bi-annually – covering six-months data (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2019a; Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2019b), and yearly – covering multiple years, such as 2016-2017 (Morrin and O’Donoghue Hynes, 2018), and 2016-2018 (Morrin, 2019). For DRHE publications and research, see: <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/info/publications>

<sup>4</sup> PASS is an online shared system that captures details of individuals in State-funded accommodations, and it is accessed by homeless service providers and all local authorities in Ireland. Thus, it provides real-time information for homeless presentation and bed occupancy across the Dublin Region. The routinely collection of administrative data through PASS allows the creation of a reasonably accurate picture of the extent of homelessness in Ireland, although it includes only those services funded under Section 10 of the 1988 Housing Act.

<sup>5</sup> Focus Ireland *Insights into Family Homelessness Series* can be found here: <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘Stable’ was chosen as the best approximate measure of ‘ontological security’ among homeless families. Homeless and housing literature identified ‘ontological security’ markers as being represented by a feeling of constancy, daily routines, privacy, and having a secure base for identity construction (Padgett, 2007).

arrangements (Long *et al.*, 2019). Focus Ireland's survey response rate was 66% (Long *et al.*, 2019), which is comparable to the average response rate for telephone surveys (67%) (De Vaus, 2013). Therefore, non-response error caused by low response rates can be ruled out.

Routinely collected administrative data has the benefit of being readily accessible. Therefore, administrative data recorded through systems such as PASS can be particularly useful for identifying distinct patterns of homeless service use and exits to tenancies, providing real-time information on the profile and overall number of homeless adults within the Irish population (Culhane, 2008; Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2020), and collecting health and social needs (Daly *et al.*, 2018). Notwithstanding the potential of these data sources, its use can still be subject to disadvantages, especially the limitation of variables available, which may not fit the researcher's needs (Judson and Popoff, 2005) or provide the level of detail that offers full explanatory value. In these cases, survey data can aid and complement administrative data by generating insights at a specific point-in-time and help to drill into insights that may not be otherwise available – for instance more subjective variables, like attitudes (Schnell, 2013), or simply more detailed information at the individual level, such as people's behaviours (Sibley *et al.*, 2010). When Focus Ireland piloted its survey on family homelessness for the first time in 2015, one of the concerns was filling the data gap left by administrative data on the reasons for family homelessness. While the DRHE has recently acknowledged the limitations of their data collection approach and proposed a plan to capture the accommodation history in a revised format of the initial assessment form with families (Morrin, 2018), no report reflecting data from the new form has yet been published. In this way, the administrative data in combination with the targeted telephone survey data can provide a more comprehensive picture on the drivers of family homelessness, with the latter necessarily complementing the currently available administrative data.

## **The Different Research Findings (DRHE and Focus Ireland)**

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The use of different research methodologies has also led to a certain degree of divergence in the studies' findings, as outlined below.

### ***DRHE's 'Reasons for Homelessness'***

The DRHE's latest report on family homelessness (Morrin, 2019) presents a single reason for homelessness as reported by the 1 112 families who newly presented to homeless services from January to December 2018. Over this twelve months period, an average of 50% of families presented as homeless directly from a tenancy in the private rented market, while 42% of the remaining families presented from staying with family or friends, citing *family circumstances* – such as relationship breakdown

and overcrowding, as their main reason for leaving their last accommodation. Also, 8% of families indicated *other* reasons – such as ‘no income source’, ‘experience of anti-social behaviour’, and ‘property damage due to fire’, etc.

Reasons for homelessness are complex and, as such, data which only collects breakdown of last living situation should be interpreted with caution. This seems especially true with regards to those families (42%) who reported reasons related to *family circumstances* since, as also acknowledged by the DRHE, “some may have moved out of private rented accommodation prior to moving in with family or friends” (Morrin, 2019, p.26).

### ***Focus Ireland’s ‘Reasons for Leaving Last Stable Home’ and ‘Housing Trajectories (and Routes into Homelessness)’***

The most recent Focus Ireland’s study (Long *et al.*, 2019) – which echoes previous quarterly data with striking similarity – reports on families’ primary reasons behind leaving their *last stable home* (as opposed to last living situation): 58% of families (n=137) reported that they had to leave due to either their *private rented property being removed from the market* – e.g. landlord selling/ moving back in, bank repossession of property, or *private rented sector (PRS) related issues* – such as overcrowding, rent increasing, landlord renovating, etc.; 30% of families (n=70) cited reasons related to *family circumstances* (e.g. family fall out, overcrowding in the family home/with family, domestic violence); and 13%<sup>7</sup> (n=30) of families reported reasons due to *other circumstances* – e.g. moved country, not specified, or anti-social behaviour/ conflict with neighbours.

Long *et al.* (2019) identified five types of ‘housing trajectories’<sup>8</sup>: (1) Very stable housing histories, which accounted for six in ten families (60%, n=142); (2) Precarious housing histories (16%, n=39); (3) Highly unstable housing history (8%, n=19); (4) New family formations (11%, n=26); and, (5) Vulnerable migrant pathways (5%, n=11).

The Focus Ireland findings highlight how the key drivers of family homelessness in the Dublin Region – *private rented property being removed from the market* and *PRS related issues*, are closely related to macro-level factors in the housing market, especially housing affordability and supply (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). Family fall-out and overcrowding certainly played a role in families’ trajectories into homelessness (Gambi *et al.*, 2018; Long *et al.*, 2019) but feature *far less prominently* here than in the DRHE data. This finding is further reinforced by the families’ broadly stable housing histories.

<sup>7</sup> Due to rounding, percentages do not add up to 100%.

<sup>8</sup> The analysis was based on the qualitative assessment of respondents’ last four accommodations, duration of stay, and main reasons for leaving each of these accommodations.

## A Secondary Analysis of Focus Ireland's Survey Data

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A secondary analysis completed by Gambi (2019)<sup>9</sup> sought to further investigate and develop typologies of family homelessness by residential patterns before entering emergency accommodation, focusing on the raw data collected as part of Long *et al.*'s (2019) cross-sectional dataset. The analysis also offers further insight into the methodological appraisal of data capturing causes of family homelessness. Long *et al.* (2019) used qualitative methods both to investigate the 'causes of homelessness' and to develop the five categories of 'housing trajectories', while Gambi (2019) investigated whether quantitative methods would have supported (or not) these findings. To this end, cluster analysis was chosen as the best exploratory data analysis tool to deal with this classification issue, with a view to complement Focus Ireland's findings on causes, trajectories and routes into homelessness. Indeed, cluster analysis has often been adopted internationally to inform more targeted interventions to homelessness, as it allows the grouping of individuals based on certain characteristics – such as their health records (Bonin *et al.*, 2009), experiences of stressful life events (Munoz *et al.*, 2005), or patterns of emergency shelter utilization<sup>10</sup> (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Waldron *et al.*, 2019). To the knowledge of the author, cluster analysis had never been used before to develop a typology of homeless families based on their residential patterns prior to becoming homeless.

Two-step cluster analysis using the log-likelihood criterion was deemed the most suitable method for analysis<sup>11</sup>, and it was conducted on four variables related to the housing history of respondents – i.e. the responses to the last four accommodations: 1) Tenure type, 2) Duration of stay, 3) Main reason for leaving accommodation, and 4) Number of times the respondent moved before becoming homeless. The latter variable (4) was created<sup>12</sup> as a proxy of how many accommodations the person had lived in prior to entering homelessness, in an attempt to better represent respondent's residential patterns.

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<sup>9</sup> The secondary analysis was part of the unpublished Master thesis submitted to the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin (Gambi, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> In these studies, homeless populations have been classified into subgroups based on the number of days spent in emergency accommodation (duration) and number of episodes (frequency).

<sup>11</sup> Further analysis was also conducted – entailing bivariate statistics and multinomial logistic regression to further explore whether different characteristics of families were associated with specific residential patterns (clusters' profiles) and predict cluster membership, but it is not reported in this research note.

<sup>12</sup> Before creating this variable, an assumption was made in relation to families' responses. It was assumed that the missing values for the second, third and fourth rounds of accommodation questions did not have relevant information. For example, if a respondent answered to only the first 3 rounds of accommodation questions, the number of times the respondent moved before becoming homeless was set as 3.

### ***The secondary analysis' research findings***

The secondary analysis identified discernible residential patterns among families prior to entering homelessness. A typology of homeless families was developed identifying three distinct and meaningful residential clusters (the 'subgroups') of families characterised by homogeneous housing trajectories: the 'Cohabitors', the 'Renters' and the 'Precarious Living' subgroup. Each of these clusters tells a different 'housing history', and sheds light on the main reasons for family homelessness in this sample. The 'Renters' cluster (50%) accounted for the largest proportion of the sample, while the 'Cohabitors' (26%) and 'Precarious Living' (24%) clusters almost evenly made up the rest of the sample.

Families in the 'Renters' cluster had repeatedly moved accommodation in the past; nevertheless, they spent a long time (56% of this cluster longer than 5 years; 23% for 3 to 4 years) in their last home prior to entering homelessness, which was in the private rental sector. Their tenancies ended due to structural factors, reporting *property removed from the market* (69%) – which includes landlord either selling, moving back in, or giving property to a family member, and bank repossession of the rental property, or *PRS related issues* (31%) – which includes overcrowding, rent increasing, landlord renovating, substandard, unable to afford rent, etc., as the main reason for leaving accommodation. Although the high number of accommodation transitions in the past could suggest some degree of instability, it is clear how this subgroup had achieved stability in the PRS immediately before presenting as homeless. For this residential subgroup, structural factors were seen as the sole trigger to homelessness.

Families in the 'Cohabitors' cluster had moved homes the least in the past; more than half of these families (56% of this cluster) cohabited with their families or partner for a relatively short period of time (less than 2 years), while the remaining 44% did so for a very long time (5 or more years). The former 56% of families is likely to be composed of those respondents who moved back to their family's home shortly before entering homelessness, possibly in an episode of hidden homelessness or couch surfing while looking for temporary accommodation. The latter 44% of families refers to those respondents who resided in their family's home for a long time, possibly with little or no experience of living in independent tenancies. These families in the 'Cohabitors' cluster noted reasons related to *family circumstances* (85%) (includes family fall out, overcrowding, domestic violence, family violence, relationship breakdown, bereavement) as the main cause of having to leave their last home – making 'relationship' factors the main trigger to homelessness for this residential subgroup.



The 'Precarious Living' cluster is characterized by higher levels of housing instability and precariousness, as families in this cluster had repeatedly moved accommodations in the past and, differently from the 'Renters' cluster, spent a very short time in their last living situation (50.9% less than 11 months; 25.5% between 1 and 2 years) – suggesting episodes of hidden homelessness within a housing history that already showed elements of instability. Almost half of these families (49.1%) mentioned 'Other' as their main reason for leaving their last accommodation – including anti-social behaviour, neighbour conflict, employment-related reasons, sought improved accommodation and moved to a new country; while the remaining half of the subgroup is evenly split between *family circumstances* and structural factors. For families in the 'Precarious' living cluster, entries into homelessness are a result of either structural, institutional, relationship or personal factors, or an interplay among them.

### ***How secondary analysis relates to existing data***

It is worth noting that the findings emerging from the secondary analysis are only partly consistent with data on 'reasons for homelessness' published by the DRHE (Morrin, 2019), while they align to a much greater extent with Focus Ireland's 'reasons for leaving last stable home'.

On the one hand, the 'Renters' cluster (50%) roughly aligns to the figures published by the DRHE, which identified 50% of families as having become homeless due to issues in the private rented sector. However, a comparison between the 'Cohabitors' cluster (26%) and the DRHE figures shows a clear divergence, with the DRHE reporting a considerably higher percentage of families (42%) as having become homeless as a direct consequence of *family circumstances*. On the other hand, both the 'Renters' (50%) and the 'Cohabitors' (26%) clusters draw a picture that better corresponds to Focus Ireland's findings – where the primary reason for homelessness reported by most of the families (58%) linked to either their *private rented property being removed from the market or PRS related issues*, while a remarkably smaller proportion of families (30%) became homeless due to *family circumstances*.

Although it is acknowledged that the studies apply distinct research designs and draw on two different samples, the misalignment between the DRHE's findings and both Long *et al.*'s (2019) and Gambi's (2019) findings is particularly striking. It indeed demonstrates how different methodologies – enquiring only about the *last living situation* versus the *last four accommodations*, can lead to different results, interpretations, and impact on both policy and the perceptions of the public. For instance, the DRHE data suggests to the public that 'family failure' is the driver of family homelessness for nearly half of their sample – a much greater proportion

than those reporting *family circumstances* reasons in Focus Ireland's data, whereas both Long *et al.*'s (2019) and Gambi's (2019) studies showed that a chronic shortage of affordable housing is instead the key risk factor behind family homelessness.

Therefore, it becomes clear how enquiring about the *last four accommodations*<sup>13</sup> could better capture "change and transition in the respondents' living situations and (partially) identify the dynamics of their housing history" (Long *et al.*, 2019, p.16). In this way, we could understand homelessness as a trajectory – which often entails a complex overlap of multiple 'causes' and life events resulting in homelessness, rather than a phenomenon driven by a single, fixed factor. Indeed, while the data made clear that residing in the private rented sector is more likely to put families on a trajectory to homelessness, this is not sufficient in itself to result in an entry to emergency accommodation. It seems likely that residential instability coupled with a relative absence of social supports and/or family network can contribute to homelessness – for example, those families in the 'Cohabitors' cluster which only cohabited for a short period of time, possibly in an episode of hidden homelessness or couch surfing while looking for another accommodation. Rethinking the causes of homelessness, as well as recognising the main drivers as housing instability and economic precariousness, have the potential to encourage more appropriate policy responses – such as well-targeted prevention measures and greater provision of affordable housing.

## Conclusion: The Importance of Research Design for Targeted Policy-Making

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Homelessness is widely considered a complex social phenomenon (Springer, 2000; United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, 2000), it presents a major challenge for policy-makers and service providers in Ireland and is a highly distressing reality for those who experience it. Policy-makers look to available evidence and research on homelessness as a way to inform and monitor policy formation and progress, all the while remaining responsive to macro-level change. The two research initiatives led by both Focus Ireland and the Dublin Region Homeless Executive offer important insights for policy-makers in relation to the profile of families experiencing homelessness and the events that preceded their entry into emergency accommodation. DRHE administrative data provides a more complete profile of all the families across the Dublin Region. However, by capturing families' recent accommodation transitions as collected through Focus Ireland survey data, the root causes of family homeless-

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<sup>13</sup> Families should be asked not only about *reasons for homelessness* but also about *tenure type* and *length of stay* for each past accommodation, as this information has proved to be extremely valuable to further the explanatory value of the data collected, and consequent analysis.

ness and the nature of housing precariousness can arguably be better understood. Equally, the secondary data cluster analysis presented in this article further demonstrates how homelessness is a protracted and complicated process; with family conflict as a cause of homelessness featuring far less frequently than might be captured in a single data point (i.e. 'last living situation').

Ultimately, research design has a profound impact on how an issue is understood and, in a context where evidence-based policy-making is considered the gold standard, research design can also influence the findings and therefore the proposed solutions or remedies. If family homelessness is understood to be caused by a dysfunctional housing market – rather than a dysfunctional family – policy makers' most effective response would be to invest far more resources into homelessness prevention services, investment in social housing (European Commission, 2019a, 2019b), tackling problems of affordability in the private rental sector among other system-level change. Understanding family homelessness as a structural issue calls into question the tens of millions of euro spent annually to expand and maintain an emergency accommodation infrastructure with the development of support services underpinned by 'therapeutic logic' (O'Sullivan, 2017, p.207). Furthermore, emerging qualitative research suggests that time spent in emergency 'family hubs' with supports does little to help families in crisis, runs the risk of institutionalising families, whilst normalising a phenomenon which could otherwise be averted (Hearne and Murphy, 2017; Share and Hennessy, 2017; Ombudsman for Children, 2019). Resolving homelessness in Ireland will "require substantial shifts and transformations in policy (from managing homelessness to ending homelessness), practice (to evidenced- based interventions) and perception by all actors (central government, local government and not- for- profit service providers)" (O'Sullivan, 2020, p.100). Ensuring that the lived reality of those affected by homelessness is embedded in the design of research and data collection is an essential starting point in this transformation.

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