# Understanding Young Adults' Pathways Into Homelessness in Northern Ireland: A Relational Approach

## Sam Ross-Brown and Gerard Leavey

Ulster University, Coleraine, Northern Ireland

> **Abstract_** *Homeless young adults are among the most vulnerable people in our society. Much of the research on homelessness has focused on risk factors, but less is known about the pathways into homelessness. Using interviews with homeless young adults in Northern Ireland, we explored the contextual structures or fields of this population and their lived experience of enforced homelessness. We use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to account for the isolated and unstable lives these young adults lead at present. We show how the limiting structures, adverse experiences, and inequality they have endured are internalised and perpetuated – we see the normalising of isolation and instability.*

> **Keywords_** *homelessness pathways; Bourdieu; habitus; qualitative; lived experience.*

## Background

Homelessness among young adults is a growing public health concern in countries around the world, including Northern Ireland (Kulik et al., 2011; Maguire, 2011; Gaetz et al., 2013; Watts et al., 2015; Morton et al., 2020). Current figures estimate that 3 824 young adults, male and female, aged between 18 and 25, presented as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive between 2018 and 2019 (NIHE, 2019). Whilst these figures have remained relatively steady over the past decade, what has changed are the number of young adults being accepted as homeless, having met the statutory thresholds – figures for 2019 indicate that 62% of those who presented were accepted (NIHE, 2019), compared with 40% in 2015 (Murphy,

2016), and 28% in 2005 (NIHE, 2012). The withdrawal of the Covid-19 job retention scheme and protection for private renters will likely see these figures increase further (NIHE, 2020). Furthermore, due to the "transient nature of homelessness" (Haldenby et al., 2007, p.1232), in addition to a lack of definitional consensus and the rising problem of 'hidden homelessness', more accurate numbers of young homeless adults remain elusive, with figures likely to be considerably higher (Bantchevska et al., 2008).

The impact, psychologically, emotionally, and physically, of the experience of homelessness at this age has been documented, with Anderson and Christian (2003, p.112) suggesting that "early homelessness can precipitate a lengthy experience of homelessness and associated social problems." Exposure to risky sexual behaviour and victimisation (Whitbeck et al., 1997; Bantchevska et al., 2008); criminality and anti-social behaviour (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994; Altena et al., 2010); substance misuse and low educational attainment (Mayock et al., 2013; Neale and Stevenson, 2015); unemployment (Thompson et al., 2010; Homeless Link, 2015); poor mental and physical health (Hyde, 2005); and continued relationship difficulties (Haldenby et al., 2007) are frequently cited among those who have transitioned into homelessness. Moreover, negative public perceptions of people experiencing homelessness reinforce dependence, poverty, and social exclusion (Stevenson et al., 2007; Farrugia, 2010).

Much of the early research on homelessness, both at home and internationally, has sought to identify individual and structural risk factors which lead to homelessness. These include family dysfunction and conflict (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Whitbeck et al., 1997; Williams and Stickley, 2011); mental illness and problematic substance use (Mallet et al., 2005; Neale and Stevenson, 2015; Tyler and Schmitz, 2013); relationship breakdown and lack of social support (Calsyn and Winter, 2006; Centrepoint, 2016; Maguire, 2011); histories of abuse, neglect, and experiences of being in care (Dworsky et al., 2013; Homeless Link 2015; Martijn and Sharpe, 2006); and poverty and unemployment (Anderson and Christian, 2003; May, 2000). The task of not only uncovering, but balancing both structural and individual risk factors has been described as the 'new orthodoxy' in the field of homelessness research (Fitzpatrick, 2005; May, 2000; Somerville, 2013). A common metaphor attached to this centres around the notion of 'pathways': 'pathways' into, through, and out of homelessness (Fopp, 2009).

### The 'new orthodoxy'

Studies exploring pathways or routes into homelessness have tended to adopt one of two approaches: identifying characteristics to define distinct pathways (Mallet et al., 2005; Martijn and Sharpe, 2006) or identifying specific features which can aid in the development of 'typologies' of pathways (Fitzpatrick, 2005).

Various studies (Hyde, 2005; Tyler and Schmitz, 2013), using narrative and social constructionist perspectives, noted the involvement of social service agencies along pathways, often associated with family conflict and violence. Mallet et al.'s (2005) thematic analysis highlighted the significance of 'blended families', reflecting the changing relationships, roles, and societal norms within the dynamic family unit and the conflicts that can arise. Maguire's (2011) Northern Ireland study of routinely collected data (Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Health and Social Care Trusts) noted that relationship breakdown, escaping violence, and problematic substance use were most cited as factors leading to homelessness. Exposure to trauma and adversity, including multiple traumas, are cited in most youth homeless cases (Craig and Hodgson, 1998; Narendorf, 2017). Mayock et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study among young people experiencing homelessness in Dublin noted decreasing family contact, increased social isolation, and greater vulnerability to problematic substance use among their sample. The factors which assist in exiting from homelessness include engagement with drug treatment services, family support and engagement with school and disassociation with homeless peers (Milburn et al., 2007; Karabanow, 2008; Henwood et al., 2012; Mayock and Parker, 2020).

A relational perspective has begun to emerge in the domain of homelessness research (Bantchevska et al., 2008; Barker, 2012, 2013, 2016; Farrugia, 2010; Neale and Stevenson, 2015). These studies, primarily drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), have begun to analyse homelessness, social capital, the role of support networks, and relations and relationships. For Bourdieu, a relationalist methodology was about uncovering and analysing the perpetuation of social inequality by transcending the structure/agency divide (Wacquant, 2013) – it is within the context of Bourdieu's theoretical framework that this research was situated.

### Theoretical context

Understanding relationships and networks is fundamental to our understanding of marginalised populations. Wacquant (2013, p.275) suggests that "the stuff of social reality, and thus the basis for heterogeneity and inequality, consists of relations" (see also Tsekeris, 2010). Using his conceptual tools, the "dialogic theoretical constructs of 'field', 'capital' and 'habitus'" (Fries, 2009, p.330), Bourdieu sought to further understand the perpetuation of social inequality.

A key factor in adopting this approach is in the context of what Beck (Beck and Lau, 2005) describes as the 'second modernity'. Characteristic of this 'second modernity' is a "decline in the influence of traditional, collective sources of meaning and action" (Farrugia, 2010, p.73) – Farrugia has argued that homeless young people "occupy a particularly marginal position in the power relations" inherent in late modern social structures and:

> *In the absence of collective explanations for inequality, young people who occupy disadvantaged structural positions become individualized 'life projects' that have 'failed' due to their lack of responsibility and active subjectivity.*

It is this subjectivity which lies at the core of Bourdieu's theoretical framework and its relationship with the surrounding objective structures in the lives of individuals. Viewing young adults as 'failed' individuals, disregards the role of the objective or contextual structures along their pathways. Bourdieu's framework, and in particular his conceptual tool of *habitus,* is most useful in understanding this relationship.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework, which he termed a 'theory of practice', centres around the concept of habitus. The habitus helps us to conceptualise human practice and action. Bourdieu (1990, p.53) described the habitus as a property of social agents and is a "structured [and] structuring structure", that is, structured by an agent's past experiences, social position and present circumstances with a pre-existing structure that moulds one's present and future actions, thus either reinforcing or modifying those same structures. The habitus is "durable" in that it lasts over time and is "transposable", active within a range of contexts (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53). The habitus becomes 'second-nature', through the processes of both primary socialisation in childhood and secondary socialisation in later life (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53). Barker (2016, p.667) adds, "the regularities and constraints of external social reality are instilled and incorporated" into one's habitus through experience – structured by the conditions of its existence, habitus "mediates between the past and present, addressing new situations in similar ways."

As Maton (2008) indicates, the habitus is not independent but instead derives from the relationship between one's dispositions (habitus) and one's position in a field (capital). Each field, or social space, contains its own pre-determined objective power and is characterised by its own 'logic', with informalised 'strategies of practice' internalised by agents, enabling, and disposing future choices and actions. Fields are areas of struggle, with agents in competition for the accumulation of various species of capital; namely, social, cultural, economic, and symbolic. Once agents have a 'feel for the game' they tend to remain within these spaces/fields.

Far from being deterministic, habitus can change over time with exposure to new experiences and external structures. This has significant ramifications for those tasked with supporting and working with homeless young adults hoping to effect change.

### Research aims

To explore young homeless adults' experiences of their pathways into homelessness – with a particular focus on relations both at the micro or agency level and the macro or structural level, and the interplay between both.

### Research questions

Several core research questions guided the study: How do young adults explain their pathways into homelessness? How do unique experiences and histories interact with the young peoples' surrounding social systems?

## Design and Methods

We used qualitative methods to identify the characteristics of this sub section of the homeless population and explore the subjective experience of relations and relationships along pathways.

### Sample

We approached 'young adults' (18 to 25 years old), males and females who were: (a) residing in temporary housing projects; or (b) in receipt of floating support services (i.e., living independently in the community with the support of outreach/ floating support workers aligned with one of the participating agencies)[1]. All participants, at one time, had been deemed homeless, having met the statutory thresholds, and had secured temporary hostel/housing project accommodation. Some had recently moved on and into independent living and were no longer deemed homeless but were continuing to receive floating support services.

Posters and leaflets providing information about the study were placed in the participating agencies' housing projects and given to young adults in receipt of floating support. Subsequently, ten young adults, five males and five females, ranging in age from 18 to 22, were recruited to take part in face-to-face interviews. Our purposive sampling strategy was to select information-rich cases who could provide an emic perspective – insider accounts of becoming homeless. This process was facilitated by key workers who helped identify those most suitable for the study. Importantly, we sought participants who were deemed sufficiently confident to provide information about sensitive and/or traumatic events and issues.

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[1]   Agencies included: The Simon Community, MACS, Barnardo's, Belfast Central Mission, Apex Housing, First Housing, and Action for Children.

## Data Collection and Analysis

To conduct the interviews, we used an approach best exemplified by the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2004). The face-to-face interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to two hours. Once the interviews had been transcribed, read, and reread, we entered the transcripts into NVivo software. This software allows for systematic coding, thus once all transcripts had been entered into NVivo, a preliminary coding framework was devised.

Because we were interested in both the pathways into homelessness and the young adults' perceptions and understanding of these journeys, these were used as the main codes.

In line with our coding structure, we then applied a thematic analysis to the data (Aronson, 1994; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic networks approach, the 'basic themes' of education, family relationships, adverse childhood experiences and support networks, instability, and isolation and mistrust, among others, were identified. These were then categorised into 'organising themes' such as contextual structures or fields, individual perceptions of pathways, and habitus formed within these contexts.

### Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Queen's University Belfast Ethics Committee prior to the fieldwork commencing. Issues concerning consent, vulnerable adults, privacy, harm minimisation, and confidentiality were addressed in accordance with the Queen's University Belfast *Policy and Principles of the Ethical Approval of Research* (2014) document.

## Findings

### Qualitative study

The findings presented reflect the interview data collected from ten young adults, aged 18 to 22, who were living in temporary hostel accommodation or in receipt of floating support services. These interviews yielded rich, in-depth information regarding the pathways into homelessness for these young adults and can be broadly categorised into the following themes: 1. uncovering the contextual structures or fields within which the participants were a part along their pathways; 2. individual perceptions of pathways; and 3. exploring the impact on the habitus, formed within these contexts and experiences. Vignettes will be used throughout to illustrate certain issues.

### Participant profile

The table below illustrates the participant profile of the young adults who were interviewed in the study.

**Table 1. Participant profile**

| No. of participants | 10 |
|---|---|
| Age range | 18 – 22 (mean = 20) |
| Male | 5 |
| Female | 5 |
| Ethnicity | all white (n=10) |
| Sexuality | all straight (n=10) |

Five participants lived in temporary hostel/housing project accommodation (n=5) and the five others lived in the community and were in receipt of floating support. Most participants (n=8) had experience of living in some type of care (kinship care, residential care, foster care, and secure accommodation) and had multiple placements. Age of first experiencing homelessness, that is, officially homeless having been assessed and deemed so by the NIHE, ranged from 16 to 18. For several of the participants, periods of 'sofa surfing' preceded this and so, unofficially, their homelessness had begun prior to age 16.

It should be noted that for those participants living in housing projects, this was temporary accommodation and whilst living there they were deemed to be homeless. On average, these housing projects had a time limit of two years, at which point participants, ideally, would move out into the community to independent living whilst receiving floating support – crucially it is at this juncture where they would no longer be deemed statutorily homeless.

### Contextual structures or fields

Almost universally, the participants described similar patterns of growing up in low-income neighbourhoods, across a sectarian divide, and often within single-parent households:

> But with living in [deprived area] you're going to get ina fight at least once or twice. It's a thing that you do as boy growing up, like. (Michael)

> See, I grew up in [deprived area known for paramilitary activity]. (Simon)

> But ah, he [dad] left when I was two…. (Michael)

> My father left when I was a baby. (Peter)

> I haven't known him for like 18 years, my dad. (Simon)

Low educational attainment and dropping out of school early due to poor relation-
ships was common and attributed to the effects of dysfunctional home environ-
ments and years of sustained bullying:

> All the special needs ones helped me, because I mostly helped them. But anyone
> half normal didn't care and picked on me. That went on until fifth year until I
> finally grew up a bit and stood up to them. (Lisa)

> So it's just really bad and so my parents were going through the separation, my
> brother was acting out, my mum was going crazy. I just couldn't handle being
> bullied on top of that. So even though I did want to do something with my life, I
> had to leave school. (Olivia)

> I left school half way through fourth year. I said I'm fine with doing the work, but
> I just don't want to be near those people anymore. (Joanne)

> I left school at twelve and after that there, I did not learn much out of school. (Peter)

> Then at tech, my background caught up with me – people found out I was
> homeless and so fake Facebook accounts were made to harass me. (Jimmy)

Parental and personal problematic substance use was frequently cited in the
interviews:

> I was out sniffing MDMA and sniffing coke and just getting in really bad states.
> (Cath)

> When I was going up to the doctor I was looking for something like diazepam or
> something… because I couldn't afford to get any more herbal… ah legal highs.
> (Michael)

> And at the time I was sort of zoned out [on prescription medication], so then we
> took… like mephedrone, stimulant legal highs. They are ecstasy… the ecstasy
> would've broke down the barriers and then I would've been able to speak. (Peter)

The participants discussed dysfunctional home life and strained familial and partner
relationships, prior to their becoming homeless:

> Well he's [ex boyfriend] on bail for like loads… he like, five pending domestic
> abuse charges so he's on bail. He's not allowed near me… no direct or indirect
> contact. He's not allowed nothing. I feel safe here cause if he even came onto
> the grounds or anything like they'll just ring the police straight away. (Cath)

> I had a complete and utter breakdown and ran away and that was when I was
> still living at home and that was the reason, one of the reasons I needed to leave
> as well just cause I couldn't cope anymore with my mum and me… personality
> clash as well so I just couldn't be bothered anymore. (Lisa)

*Yous [family] are just all mad. That's not okay, at all. They're just so, not normal and I need a normal life for a while you know… I've had enough fantasy shit. (Michael)*

*Yeah cause her [mum] and her boyfriend were always causing drama and like she was going out drinking, bringing home the cops. I mean you know it's bad when the cops, who are normally coming to the door to ask about your children, are… like… they bring home your mother instead. (Olivia)*

Almost all of the participants (n=8) had experience of being in at least one care setting – kinship care, residential care, foster care, and secure accommodation – and some talked of having had multiple placements:

*Like, grew up in care… so went into care when I was like three. (Cath)*

*I'm lucky to even have the same foster family I've had since I was a baby. I know a lot of people have been passed around. (Lisa)*

### Individual perceptions of pathways

While their stories typically illustrate the disadvantage and dysfunctional family milieu of many participants, we were interested in how the participants made sense of these experiences. Despite their histories and limited choices and life chances, most still claimed a sense of agency, taking responsibility for the decisions made along the pathways to homelessness. This is reminiscent of Beck's (Beck and Lau, 2005) 'second modernity', with young people being viewed as 'failed life projects' and thus believing this themselves; a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, if conceptualised through Bourdieu's framework, we start to understand the complexity of the factors in play here. Michael's story best exemplifies this.

### Michael

Born in an area of acute socio-economic disadvantage and paramilitary presence, Michael was a child when his father left the family home, and for the next ten years, various male partners of his mother moved in and then out of the various homes they lived in. Often these relationships were emotionally abusive. Michael had been exposed to drug taking within the home, the first instance of which he recalled when he was five years old. Michael recounts there being a *"strange smell"* in the home when he was a child and one time coming across *"this box… with a big brown block in it"*, which years later he realised *"it was dope".* Michael recounted the reaction from his mother's then partner to him discovering the box as being very negative – he was *"angry".*

When Michael starting smoking cannabis, he explained that his mum was fine with it, initially:

*Aye, best that I do it there [at home] than somewhere else really in her eyes.*

> *We would've just sat in my room and smoked up and she woulda brought us in a big massive tray of toast… I loved it.*

By the time Michael was 15, having been excluded from school for *"not fitting in"*, he would regularly spend evenings taking cocaine and mephedrone (New Psychoactive Substance) with his mother and her partner:

> *One night me [my mum] and [mum's boyfriend] were sitting sniffing… they had [cocaine] and I had meth. I didn't think that me ma was going to take meth and I was like, right [mum's boyfriend]… But aw naw, me ma got ripped into it.*

Michael's relationship with his mother's partner was fraught and he detailed his struggles in dealing with his abusive treatment towards her. Michael's drug taking, which at first his mother allowed, soon began to spiral out of control, and as addiction took hold and his behaviour became more erratic, he was asked to leave the family home:

> *And it got a wee bit out of hand then. She thought it was just going to be a phase but I got addicted to it. Can't really just drop it, it's not a choice anymore. And she just… she got fed up I wasn't going off it and I was losing the rag when I didn't have it and she was all 'You have to leave'.*

Michael's subsequent drug addiction exacerbated underlying mental health vulnerabilities such as anxiety and stress, which he stated were a result of having grown up in an abusive and chaotic environment. Despite such adversities, Michael stated that he:

> *… accepted that no one else is to blame at all in any way shape or form and it's entirely everything that I've [pauses] every decision that I've made has led to me being completely alone and there's a good reason for it.*

Michael continued to reflect that he realised he *"wasn't worth anybody's time"* and that he had to *"face facts… if you are shit, just not the best that you could be… there's a reason why people aren't looking to be around you."*

### Understanding a habitus formed within these contexts

#### Relationship instability

For both Olivia and Jimmy, growing up in environments characterised by conflict with others, and significant social isolation because of, and exacerbated by, school bullying, led to profound mistrust in others. Instability was a key characteristic of many of their contextual fields. Thus, these regularities and constraints of social reality had been inculcated into both Olivia and Jimmy's individual habitus through socialisation and experience. Lacking the social skills to mix with others, their resulting 'strategies' were often to 'choose' to continue to lead isolated lives, free from close ties or bonds with others. In Olivia's story, we can begin to see what a

habitus formed within a history of relationship instability looks like, and how this past, and its influence on the present, can also affect future tendencies or actions at the pre-reflexive level.

## Olivia

Parental conflict permeated Olivia's home life – from as far back as she could remember her parents argued and fought. When this conflict began to include neighbours when Olivia was around ten years old, she remembers this being a turning point for her in her life:

*I was a great kid, I did my homework well, I was nice to teachers, I was nice to people. Did everything right and then as soon as P6 hit I was just going crazy.*

*Honestly, it's since I got older. I was a very confident child, I was making loads of friends, it was crazy.*

The situation deteriorated further when her parents divorced. Olivia discussed her mum's litigious nature and outlined their frequent moves from one area or city to another, provoked by conflict between her mum and neighbours, friends, and family. By the time Olivia started secondary school, in a new town, she found it difficult to make friends, fatalistically avoiding friendships, knowing that they would ultimately have to move on again:

*I didn't want friends… I didn't want to like sit down and do my homework or anything. I'd just come home from school, shove my school bag in the corner and sit and watch TV.*

She and her younger brother regularly changed schools, but due to the level of family dysfunction and involuntary isolation created by their mother's behaviour, both required counselling. When discussing the eventual relationship breakdown between her and her mother, Olivia stated that after her parents divorced:

*… I was living with my mum for a while but then that didn't work out so I got… I moved in with my aunt then that didn't work out (laughs) and then I moved in with my dad for a year and then that didn't work out so I had to stay at my friends for two weeks before I finally got a place in here in the hostel.*

Olivia discussed the role reversal that occurred during her teens, between her and her mother, due to her mother's excessive drinking and 'partying' with her new partner: *"my teenage years were just thrown out the window."* Her mother's problems isolated Olivia further. When several placements with other family members broke down, Olivia moved into the hostel where she lives currently, having been deemed statutorily homeless by the NIHE. Her strategy to *"keep myself to myself"* and of keeping her distance from others were indicative of her lack of trust

in others, but also her lack of skills to make her own friends. When talking about socialising, Olivia stated that she wasn't very good at talking and this progressed onto how she preferred to talk to strangers:

> *Like, I moved in and I could see all the people, like, running around and they were like nice enough and said hello but I just couldn't talk… I'm not a very people person. Like, talking to you now… I'm okay cause you'll be leaving and I won't need to see you again.*

What these findings illustrate is that for Olivia, early childhood experiences of family conflict, the instability of frequent house and school moves, and social isolation had been internalised via primary socialisation. As she progressed into her teens, her isolation, lack of social skills and confidence, and the traumas in her home life were incorporated in a period of secondary socialisation. Olivia's inability to make or keep friends within the field of education reinforced the notion of instability in relationships. Thus, Olivia had 'internalised the external', and the instability in and impermanence of relationships were normalised and expected by her. Towards the end of her story, Olivia conceptualised her current situation, one in which she continued to be isolated and struggled to make friends:

> *So I feel like I'm choosing now, the right people to be in my life.*

### Housing instability

Instability in the field of housing and transience were dominant aspects of the participants' narratives. Many talked about transitions, living with friends, relatives, and partners, and moving between hostel, supported, and community-based accommodation. The following extracts highlight this well:

> *Sean came when I was seven, left when I was ten and then we went to Australia at the end of my eleven plus… then we came back to [home town] again and me ma met her boyfriend and then we moved again. (Michael)*

> *… went into care when I was like three and then left when I was eighteen. Moved out of the children's home and then moved in with my sister and then moved out of my sisters and moved in with my boyfriend and then moved out of my boyfriends into a hostel and then out of the hostel to here. (Cath)*

Others discussed the chaos they found when they first entered hostels or temporary housing projects and the associated problems:

> *I kind of got used to it you know the neighbours getting drunk and shouting and stuff. (Olivia)*

> *It's known as probably the scummiest place in town. (Michael)*

*… it was terrible, it was the worst. There's like… anyone's in it. Like paedophiles, drug addicts… anyone can go into it. It's like 36 flats so there's all sorts. (Cath)*

For those who had moved into independent community living and were no longer deemed homeless, they discussed the anti-social behaviour which at first shocked them but that they soon became accustomed to:

*… there's a lot of problems when I moved in to the point where people were, umm, just generally… violence. But I have to say I'm lucky in the place I live in because there's a lot worse…. (Lisa)*

A closer exploration of Peter's story offers up interesting findings with regards to the effects of housing instability, in relation to other structural and individual factors, on the habitus.

## Peter

Growing up in a deprived area known for paramilitary activity with the backdrop of his family's history, Peter, and his mother, experienced considerable distress. When discussing his father's past and things he had done prior to going to prison, Peter described the intense paranoia which his mother began to experience and which he eventually came to experience:

*You see my mum thought every single person knew about so then that made me think that…. I felt very exposed. More detached and more different from other people… That was the way my mum was raising me to be… I realised that as I got older.*

*Just the sort of hectic life I grew up in… and then the subconscious fear of, you know, a primal fear of getting killed.*

His anxieties and fears were carried with him into the school setting, and he struggled to cope academically. He was also bullied, and Peter felt that he would eventually be hurt or punished for things his father had done:

*… then I'm thinking, is that going to come back on me. And it's been the paranoia of that over the years. You know I've sort of been conditioned that way from my mother.*

His mother experienced mental health problems and Peter, fearful of leaving her alone with her violent partner, often missed school:

*[for as long as] I can remember I was taking in my mum's problems. Like I was being kept off school and that and sitting with her all day while she cried and that over the past, her past….*

Peter reflected on some of the traumatic things he witnessed as a child and held some resentment towards his mother for then abandoning him when his own problems became too much for her:

> *I was never around extended because they fought, internal fighting for years. I mean, I watched my mum getting the face beat off her with a knuckle duster and an uncle once took a knife out and that shocked me…. I was only a child when that happened.*

> *That's why I was angry there for a while cause she disowned me.*

Additionally, lacking a solid and consistent figure in his life, Peter stated that he 'chose' to leave at age twelve but soon returned. Shortly after this, Peter was asked to leave the family home due to his increasingly challenging behaviour. He spent some time in various residential care homes before a brief period spent 'sofa-surfing' in friends' houses and then entering the homeless hostel system and starting to experiment with recreational drugs. Subsequent brief periods were then spent in community based housing but Peter explained why he felt this often broke down:

> *Because you know, even if you get a stable place, you know a house, you still have all that stuff [trauma] you've collected, you know, picked up from all around. Like you know if you go from a… everyday house into a hostel, you know a hostel is going to be a complete smack around the face. Because you know there's going to be boys taking drugs, ones coming up tapping you fags constantly, there's gonna be all that.*

The hostel environment heightened his already anxious and distrusting disposition. Peter continued to discuss getting his first flat, in the community, and why he felt this placement broke down:

> *People will state the facts, you know 'Right, that's it you've got a house!'… and you're like sitting inside it thinking 'Well I'm not stable like' \*laughs\*. For example, for me you know I'm sitting there and I'm not used to this. It doesn't matter where I am because you know I'm still going to look at the world through my eyes.*

Now in his current community accommodation for seven months, he was becoming increasingly agitated and fearful of his neighbours, suggesting he may not be in the placement for much longer and that it would probably eventually break down:

> *And you know, you sorta get used to this chaotic lifestyle, where you know nowhere is permanent….*

Here, we begin to see the impact of housing inequality upon some of these young adults, illustrated through Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Thus, we suggest that early and subsequent childhood experiences in many fields – education, housing,

relationships – are internalised by the respondents to such a degree that they come to view these fields as natural and, unconsciously or pre-reflexively, these underlying and unspoken 'truths' come to influence their future thought and action.

Peter's story illustrates the complex interaction between both individual and field-level factors along his pathway: the primary socialisation created by the fear of violence and reprisal and his father's paramilitary involvement; the subsequent damaged self-confidence and unhappy school experiences and withdrawal, at a very young age; and the mental health problems and drug use that followed. Involuntarily leaving the family home at a young age, followed by years of housing instability, resulted in a habitus that came to accept as 'taken for granted' the fact that accommodation was temporary and would ultimately not last.

## Discussion

The findings from this study have highlighted that far from being the result of individual pathology, homelessness for these young adults has been the result of a complex interaction between the individual and structural level factors at play within the conditions of their existence. Born into chaotic, dysfunctional, and often 'broken' families and households within deprived areas strongly impacted by sectarian conflict, the associated negative factors of these conditions became clear. Family conflict, poor housing, traumatic experiences, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, and experiences of being in care featured strongly – findings which have been reflected in the literature (Anderson and Christian, 2003; Dworsky et al., 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Homeless Link, 2015; Mallet et al., 2005; Martijn and Sharpe, 2006; Neale and Stevenson, 2015; Tyler and Schmitz, 2013; Whitbeck et al., 1997).

The negative psychological impact of these early childhood experiences was highlighted. Feelings of fear, anxiety, and mistrust within participants were often exacerbated by the isolation their contextual conditions induced. These feelings, typically, were transferred into other fields in the lives of participants. Lacking the resources and skills needed to make friends, increased isolation, and the bullying which many participants reported in school, reinforced their mistrust in others in addition to heightening anxiety and mental health difficulties. As in other studies, in most cases, we noted an eventual and complete disengagement from these institutions (Anderson and Christian, 2003). Similarly, Piat et al. (2015) described a deepening negative sequelae in which individual factors interacted with salient structural factors along their participants' pathways. For example, running away from home exacerbated existing mental health vulnerabilities, leading to increased substance misuse, poor social relationships, and inappropriate accommodation.

Lacking the necessary resources to support themselves, the participants then entered the homeless hostel system and an increased exposure to harmful or risky behaviours. These findings are supported by McNaughton's (2008) study – homelessness for her participants could be explained "largely in terms of their lack of resources… and the edgework they engaged in or experienced in response to this lack" (Somerville, 2013, p.400). Crucially this 'edgework' further diminished what were already minimal resources and was not done simply out of choice but had been largely shaped by their limiting histories.

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of these narratives was the participants' unquestioning acceptance of how their lives had unravelled. Many took full responsibility for becoming homeless, with no regard for, or knowledge of, the systemic inequality that has led them to that point. For them, their lives, with the limited and limiting choices it has offered them, is simply 'taken-for-granted'. The theme of instability in the lives of respondents was a recurring one and featured in many aspects of their lives: housing, relationships, education, and the support systems they were in contact with, both formal and informal. Respondents who remained at home moved frequently to escape conflict with neighbours or because of paramilitary threats. For those who were in the care system, multiple placement breakdowns resulted in young people moving between foster, residential, and hostel accommodation.

The instability, insecurity and anxiety of childhood remained with respondents throughout subsequent years. This instability, played out in relationships and in housing, then became taken-for-granted or 'doxic'. For Bourdieu (1977, p.164), doxa is the experience by which "the natural and social world appears as self-evident." In examining the 'habitus', this external, 'natural' world becomes the internal. Respondents then learned and incorporated specific 'strategies', pre-reflexively, which in turn perpetuated this instability and isolation. When participants entered hostel accommodation, the internalisation of early childhood and subsequent reinforcing experiences became most apparent. Characterised by instability and isolation, these young adults, pre-reflexively, had internalised these experiences which had now become defining features of their own strategies or practices. 'Choosing' to further isolate themselves from others, as a maladaptive strategy for survival.

Specific strategies adopted by the respondents included anticipating housing placements breaking down or discussing their 'choice' or decision to remain isolated from others – leading to a form of pre-emptive sabotage of the placement and/or circumstances. Rejecting the situation before the situation rejects them. Peter frequently referred to the fact that housing was not permanent and discussed reasons why he felt his current placement would inevitably break down. Similarly,

Olivia referred to the fact that she 'chose' not to have friends and to isolate herself, which may be viewed as making a 'virtue out of necessity' but, nevertheless, illustrating the 'doxic' nature of her social world.

The instability characteristic along pathways can negatively affect the "relative stability of independent housing" (Barker, 2016, p.675), resulting in respondents pre-empting the service ceasing. Given the paramilitary connections in his family, Peter grew up with a pervasive sense of fear of harm from others and was evidently paranoid in his current accommodation that his neighbours were intent on hurting him. Barker (2013), in a large-scale, ethnographic study, found similar strategies used by his participants. In what he termed 'strategies of autonomy', Barker (2013) stated that due to the instability and uncertainty in their lives, respondents drew upon these strategies as a way to exert self-reliance, but that ultimately, what resulted was further isolation.

## Limitations

Despite the insights obtained through the data collected, there are limitations to the results. The study relied upon participants' retrospective recall of events and experiences. As a result, the issue of reliability of information can arise here (Martijn and Sharpe, 2006), particularly given the chaotic lifestyles and traumatic experiences characteristic of the lives of many homeless young adults. As such, information or stories may be inaccurate, and accounts distorted over time.

A purposive sampling strategy was used which can be open to selection bias and error. Key workers from the housing agencies, which supported the participants, selected those they deemed eligible for the study – given that the focus of the study, nor any element of it, was not to discuss or evaluate current accommodation this was deemed an appropriate sampling strategy.

It is not intended for this study to be representative of all young adults who have experienced homelessness and therefore should not be generalised.

## Conclusions

In summary, this research has demonstrated that the young adults experiencing homelessness in the study have experienced significant disadvantage from early childhood and this has taken many forms. The negative psychological impact of these experiences in primary socialisation are often compounded at many junctures as their lives progress, most notably within fields such as education, housing, and in their relationships. The instability, dysfunction, and isolation in their lives and the

fear and anxiety this evokes become internalised and these young adults come to view these limiting fields as natural or 'taken-for-granted'. These features of instability and isolation become defining features of their habitus and the strategies they draw upon, sub-consciously, in the present resulting in the perpetuation of the instability and isolation they have become accustomed to. Barker (2016, p.681) summarises this when he asserts:

> *Habitus reminds us that what can appear to be the choices or practices of individuals can obscure what is actually the structural conditions and limitations from which they have emerged and exist.*

That said, as we know, the habitus can change with exposure to new experiences and external structures. Thus, dynamic responses are needed from all those tasked with supporting these young adults if they are to have the best chance of managing transitions and working towards stability in their lives (Piat et al., 2015). Furthermore, support agencies must strive to understand and endeavour to change the structural factors which shape and compound the instability in the lives of these young adults. What the findings starkly support is the belief that these young adults should not be blamed for their current position and instead, deserve our attention, time, and resources.

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