



Family Homelessness in Europe

By **Nicholas Pleace**, *Director of the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York*

We know less about family homelessness in Europe than we do about the experience of lone homeless men and, also, less about the experience of children who become homeless than we know about people living rough. One reason for this, which the European Observatory on Homelessness explored, in our 2017 research supported by FEANTSA *Family Homelessness in Europe*¹, is that social services in most European countries provide protections for children facing destitution and it was long thought that this made family homelessness unusual.

We have also assumed that women's homelessness is more unusual than men's homelessness, because when relationships break down and homelessness occurs, dependent children are more likely to stay with their mother. Children facing homelessness should, again, be protected by social services who should also protect their mother. There is growing evidence that this assumption may be wrong and that both family homelessness *and* women's homelessness may be more widespread than was thought².

Women with children appear more likely to fall back on family and friends when they experience homelessness than is the case for lone adult men³. Research has suggested that a high proportion of women lone parents with children only seek assistance from homelessness or social services when they reach a point where they cannot stay with family or friends any longer. Homeless women with children may only approach services weeks or months *after* they first become homeless, because they only seek those services when they can no longer stay with relatives or friends⁴.

Some families may stay living in these arrangements with friends or relatives, experiencing hidden homelessness, for prolonged periods, but we are not sure how widespread this might be and need to do some more research. This is important, because while we may not think of people staying with friends or relatives as 'homeless', the reality of these living arrangements can be harsh. A family staying with family or friends has no legal right to live where they are, and they may be without their own front door or private space which they control, experiencing problems like severe overcrowding and sometimes living in situa-

tions where there are safeguarding concerns. If you have no control over your own living space, or privacy and no legal rights saying that somewhere is your home, then you do not have a home, even if there is a roof over your head. A family in such situations might also be living in badly overcrowded or hazardous conditions.

When we think about a 'family' we tend to think of two parents and one or more children. However, family homelessness across Europe and also in North America and Australia is often experienced by lone women parents. Just as most of the adults living rough are probably men⁵, family homelessness is probably mainly experienced by lone women parents with dependent children. Family homelessness is *highly gendered* because it is mainly experienced by women bringing up children on their own.

As with all forms of homelessness, simple poverty can be a trigger for family homelessness, for example if one or both parents loses their job. However, there is evidence that family homelessness is most frequently triggered by a relationship breakdown in combination with relative poverty. When a relationship has come to a normal end, a lone woman parent with her child, or children, can find themselves facing housing costs they can no longer afford. Family homelessness happens, quite often, mainly because there is less income than there used to be, i.e. if their home were more affordable, or the family had more money, homelessness would not occur.

Family homelessness can also be triggered by abusive or violent relationship breakdown, where violence or abuse has been directed by one parent against another and/or a child may also have come under threat. While it can be the case that men can be victims of these forms of abuse, the reality is that most cases involve a male perpetrator who directs violence or abuse at a woman. In the UK, it has been estimated that one in four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime and 70% of victims of domestic violence are women⁶. Research across mainland Europe, the UK and North America into family homelessness has suggested that domestic violence, by men against women, is one of the main causes of family homelessness.

- 1 Isabel Baptista; Lars Benjaminsen; Volker Busch-Geertsema and Nicholas Pleace (2017) *Family Homelessness in Europe* FEANTSA: Brussels <https://www.feantsaresearch.org/en/comparative-studies/2017/12/15/comparative-studies-on-homelessness?bcParent=763>
- 2 Paula Mayock and Joanne Bretherton (Eds.) (2016) *Women's Homelessness in Europe* London: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://womenshomelessness.org/blog/womens-homelessness-europe-book-now-published/>
- 3 Joanne Bretherton (2017) Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness *European Journal of Homelessness* 11(1), pp. 1-21 <https://www.feantsaresearch.org/en/comparative-studies/2017/12/15/comparative-studies-on-homelessness?bcParent=763>
- 4 Nicholas Pleace, Suzanne Fitzpatrick *et al* (2008) *Statutory Homelessness in England: The Experience of Families and 16-17 Year Olds* London: Department for Communities and Local Government. http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/73926/1/Final_Communities_web_version.pdf
- 5 There are probably more women than are thought, issues with how numbers are counted and estimated may mean they are not fully represented, see: Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology* London: St Mungo's <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/138075/>
- 6 <https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-responds-to-latest-ONS-crime-survey-figures-on-domestic-abuse/>



Families may have been through traumatic experiences, where relationship breakdown, violence and abuse in the home, or another life changing event, such as the death of a partner, has led to homelessness. However, while there is some evidence that rates of depression among adults in homeless families can be higher than average, some of the other issues and needs we tend to associate with homelessness are not present.

Homeless families, for the most part, do not have high and complex support needs, such as severe mental illness or problematic drinking or drug use, nor are they characterised by high levels of contact with criminal justice systems. This is a quite different picture than that which we are used to with lone homeless men, particularly those men who have been homeless for a long time or on a repeated basis, where support needs around addiction and severe mental illness are much more common than among the general population, as is contact with law enforcement and emergency health services.

The best services for homeless families need to meet two main needs. First, there is a need to ensure support around domestic violence and abuse is in place and second, any response to family homelessness must be housing focused and housing led.

The first need, where family homelessness has been triggered by violence or abuse, centres on ensuring that a woman and her child or children are safe. While we tend to think of domestic violence services as distinct from 'homelessness' services, refuges and secure supported housing for women with children play a significant role in reducing homelessness. We often do not appreciate the full scale of that role because we tend to design policy, administration and measurement of domestic violence services separately from 'homelessness' services. This is another reason why family homelessness experienced by women

lone parents is probably more widespread than was thought to be the case, because we apply the label of 'at risk of violence and abuse' to families who are also, actually, homeless.

There are some examples of services developed specifically for homeless families who are at risk of violence and abuse. One system is 'sanctuary' schemes, which provide enhanced security for someone, usually a woman and her children, with support services, in combination with criminal justice interventions to manage the (usually male) perpetrator. Sanctuary schemes enable a family who were potentially at risk of homelessness due to violence and abuse to remain in their existing home, making them safe and secure by removing the source of the threat, rather than picking up the pieces after a parent and their children has been forced to leave their home'. Another recent development is DAHA accreditation (domestic abuse housing alliance), which is designed to create much better reporting and recording of abuse and violence for social housing providers. DAHA accreditation is designed to enable early interventions to stop abuse and violence and to help prevent associated homelessness⁸.

As most lone parent and two parent homeless families do not have high and complex needs, most just require a home that offers them legal security, sufficient space, adequate quality and an affordable rent in a reasonable neighbourhood. While some families will need support and there are interesting innovations like Housing First services for families with high and complex needs being developed, most family homelessness in Europe happens primarily for economic and social reasons. This means family homeless can often be best and most effectively solved by quickly providing adequate, affordable homes, stopping unnecessary evictions and other forms of homelessness prevention.

“Family homelessness happens, quite often, mainly because there is less income than there used to be.”

7 [Anwen Jones; Joanne Bretherton et al \(2011\) The Effectiveness of Schemes to Enable Households at Risk of Domestic Violence to Remain in Their Own Homes London: Communities and Local Government.](#)

8 <https://www.dahalliance.org.uk>