

Executive Summary

# Living in Limbo

Homeless Young People's  
Paths to Housing

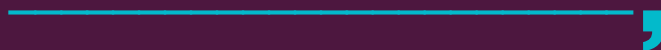
Paula Mayock and  
Sarah Parker





*Once you've been [homeless]  
it's a constant feeling of uneasiness;  
you're never quite secure.*

**Maria, 26, Phase 2**



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# Living in Limbo

## Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing

Paula Mayock and  
Sarah Parker



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# Introduction

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This publication documents the key findings to emerge from a qualitative longitudinal study of youth homelessness in Ireland. Initiated in 2013, (Mayock *et al.*, 2014)<sup>1</sup> the research aimed to ‘track’ homeless young people over time in order to more fully understand their trajectories through and possibly out of homelessness. A key aim was to generate in-depth knowledge and understanding of the factors, processes and dynamics that impact the housing transitions of homeless young people *over time*. The research makes an innovative departure from previous qualitative longitudinal studies of youth homelessness, both in Ireland and elsewhere, by including the views and perspectives of a family member of approximately one quarter of the study’s young people.

The core analytical goals of the study were as follows:

- 1** To trace the flow of events and experiences that impact young people’s housing and homelessness trajectories over time.
- 2** To identify the factors and circumstances that protect young people from entering into prolonged or ongoing homeless ‘states’ and those that facilitate the transition to stable housing.
- 3** To identify factors that act as barriers to stable, sustainable housing in the case of young people who experience continued or repeat homelessness.
- 4** To ‘track’ young people’s family relationships over time and examine the impact of continuity and change in these relationships on their lives.

The key findings presented in this publication are concerned primarily with uncovering the drivers of young people’s ‘journeys’ through homelessness, with specific attention directed to their experiences of accessing housing.

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<sup>1</sup> Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Murphy, A. (2014) *Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.



# The Study: Aims and Research Methods

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## Study Design

The study was designed to capture temporal dimensions of the homeless experience and involved the collection of data at two points in time; the first between May 2013 and January 2014 (Phase 1) and the second between July 2015 and April 2016 (Phase 2).

## Recruitment and Retention

At baseline, forty ‘out of home’ young people (including twenty-five young men and fifteen young women) aged between 16 and 24 years enlisted in the study. Participants were recruited from a range of statutory and non-statutory services in Dublin (thirty-four participants) and Cork (six participants) targeting homeless or ‘at risk’ youth. The types of services used as recruitment sites included: emergency, short-term and supported temporary accommodation services; crisis intervention services; drop-in/day centres; education, training and employment services; and aftercare services. To be eligible for participation in the research, young people had to be:

- 1 Aged between fourteen and twenty-four years;
- 2 Currently homeless or living in temporary, insecure, or unfit accommodation; or
- 3 ‘At risk’ of homelessness by virtue of having experienced housing instability or a previous episode of homelessness.

Where appropriate, permission was sought from participating young people to contact a nominated family member and this resulted in the conduct of a further ten interviews, five of them with a parent (all mothers) of participating young people and five with

a sibling (all sisters). At Phase 1, the sample comprised forty young people and ten family members. During Phase 2 of the study, twenty-nine young people and eight family members were successfully ‘tracked’ and re-interviewed, yielding a retention rate of 74%.

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<b>Phase 1 (2013–2014)</b>	➤ 40 young people
	➤ 10 family members

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<b>Phase 2 (2015–2016)</b>	➤ 29 young people
	➤ 8 family members

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## Data Collection Methods

At baseline, life history interviews were conducted with all participating young people (n=40) who, at the outset of the interview, were invited to tell their ‘life story’. Following this open-ended invitation to share their life experiences, several topics and issues – homeless and housing history; family and peer relationships; education, training and employment; substance use; physical and mental health, and so on – were discussed, as relevant to individual young people. During follow-up (Phase 2) interviews, young people (n = 29) were asked to ‘update’ their life stories and to discuss any significant events, experiences or developments since the time of our first contact with them; they were also encouraged to reflect on their situations, past and present, and to talk about their perspectives on change and continuity in their lives.

Family members were interviewed in-depth during Phases 1 and 2 of the study and invited to share their views on their son’s/daughter’s/sibling’s life circumstances, their homelessness and living situations and any concerns they had about the young person’s well-being.

# Sample Profile

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## The Study's Young People

**Age:** At baseline, the study's young people were aged between 14 and 24 years. Follow-up participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 years, which meant that all had reached the legal age of adulthood by Phase 2 of the study.

**Gender:** At baseline, twenty-five of the young people were male and fifteen were female. Of the twenty-nine young people who were re-interviewed at Phase 2, seventeen were young men and twelve were young women.

**Living situations:** Thirty-nine of the study's forty young people were homeless at Phase 1 of the research while just one participant – a young woman aged 22 years – had been recently housed following a prolonged period of housing instability. By Phase 2, seven of the twenty-nine (24%) who participated in a follow-up interview had exited homelessness while twenty-two either remained homeless or had entered into a living situation considered to be 'insecure' or 'inadequate'. Thus, *76% of the study's young people continued to experience homelessness approximately two years subsequent to our first contact with them.*

## The Study's Family Members

### Relationship to the Study's Young People:

At baseline, ten family members (including five mothers and five female siblings) were interviewed. Eight of these family members participated in a follow-up interview, four of them mothers and four female siblings.

**Living Situations:** Most of the study's family members remained in the same accommodation over the course of the study, which included private rental sector (PRS) housing (n = 1), a foster care placement (n = 1), Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) housing (n = 1) and private residences (n = 2). However, three participants, including two siblings and one mother, reported significant changes in their living arrangements. One mother, for example – who was residing in an emergency hostel alongside her adult daughter at the time of Phase 1 – had moved to private rented accommodation by the time of follow up, while two siblings – who were living in transitional and PRS housing, respectively, at baseline – reported experiences of homelessness between Phases 1 and 2 of the study.

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Homelessness/Housing Status	Phase 1 (2013–14) Number (%)	Phase 2 (2015–16) Number (%)
Homeless	39 (98%)	22 (76%)
Housed	1 (2%)	7 (24%)
Total sample	40 (100%)	29 (100%)

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# Young People's Homelessness and Housing Transitions

At Phase 2, the young people's homeless and housing situations were categorised according to ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion.

## Young People's Living Situations at Phase 2, Categorised according to ETHOS

Conceptual Category	No. of Young People		
	Male	Female	Total
Housed	3	4	7
Insecure	5	2	7
Houseless	8	4	12
Roofless	1	0	1
Inadequate	0	2	2

The data above suggest a continuum of residential stability and instability. At the time of follow-up, the largest category (n=12 or 41%) were 'houseless' while one young person (3%) was 'roofless'. Seven young people (24%) were 'housed' and a further seven (24%) were 'insecurely' housed. The remaining two young people (8%) were living in 'inadequate' accommodation. Thus, less than one quarter of the study's young people had exited homelessness by Phase 2 of the study; furthermore, for some, these exits were tenuous and unstable.

## Young People's Trajectories through Homelessness

All of the young people had moved at least once between Phases 1 and 2 of the research, with the vast majority reporting *multiple transitions* through a range of living situations. This level of transience compromised young people's ability to achieve and maintain any form of stability in their lives. To capture the young people's trajectories through homelessness, the following three-fold typology was developed in accordance with their reported levels of movement between living places (including homeless service settings, situations of 'hidden' homelessness and housing) over the course of the study:

- 1 Linear Trajectories through Homelessness
- 2 Non-linear Trajectories through Homelessness
- 3 Chaotic Trajectories and Continuous Homelessness

Broadly speaking, young people's accounts of residential movement and change – and their transitions between living situations – suggested more linear (and less chaotic) trajectories among those who: a) reported low(er) levels of mobility; b) were engaged with services and had established links with service professionals; c) had regular contact and positive relationships with family members; and d) reported low(er)-level needs in relation to substance use and mental health.

## Young People's Stories of Movement and Residential Change

### The Nature and 'Shape' of Young People's Engagement with Services

Positive relationships with service professionals (key workers, outreach workers, aftercare workers, social workers and so on) were linked to fewer and smoother transitions between living situations. Strong links or 'bonds' with service providers bolstered young people's ability and willingness to engage with homelessness and housing support systems, provided them with practical assistance in securing appropriate 'move on' accommodation and helped young people to better understand their entitlements in relation, for example, to social welfare assistance, rent allowance and so on.

*I was linked in with a woman from [homelessness organisation]. She's the one that got me the place [STA], and she was a great help. I actually thought I was going nowhere until I met her.*

**Fiona, 21, Phase 2**

However, a considerable number of young people reported a host of barriers to service engagement due to one or a number of the following:

- › Past negative experiences with a service(s);
- › Tenuous or strained relationships with staff members in one or more service settings;
- › Disruption arising from their continuous movement between living situations; and/or
- › No longer being able to access systems of intervention due, for example, to reaching (or exceeding) the maximum length of stay and/or failing to meet the eligibility criteria for service provision.

Disengagement from services placed young people at higher risk of embarking on trajectories characterised by high levels of residential displacement and social isolation, making them more vulnerable to continued homelessness and housing instability and exposing

them to other risks, including substance use and mental health problems.

### The Support Needs of Young People: Substance Use and Mental Health

A large number of participants reported complex and overlapping support needs, often related to long-standing mental health problems and/or problematic substance use. These young people's homeless and housing pathways were characterised by:

- › Ongoing patterns of movement between service settings and situations of 'hidden' homelessness;
- › Repeat stays in institutional settings, including acute or psychiatric hospitals, residential alcohol/drug treatment facilities and prison; and
- › Heightened levels of substance use and/or deteriorating mental health that frequently coincided with periods spent sleeping rough and/or living (back) in emergency provision.

*[While sleeping rough] I was walking around and I was just thinking of things. My mind was over-thinking and I just burst out into tears and I couldn't stop like. And, to be honest, I felt a bit suicidal like. My mental health was at rock bottom. I felt like I was taking a nervous breakdown, I felt like I just couldn't take it anymore.*

**Sophie, 22, Phase 2**

The relationship between high levels of residential instability and young people's support needs (particularly in relation to substance use and mental health) was bi-directional in the sense that, on the one hand, prolonged patterns of movement between homelessness and insecure living situations were sometimes precipitated by drug and/or mental health-related crises and, on the other, they served to exacerbate substance use and mental health problems, particularly with the passing of time. These findings suggest that young people's situations were being managed via homelessness service provision but not ultimately resolved due, at least in part, to long-standing issues related to their substance use and mental health.

# Non-Housing Transitions

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Young people's journeys through and out of homelessness typically involved a whole host of events and experiences that extended beyond those associated with housing. The range of personal, social, educational, familial and economic transitions reported was significant and also served to 'shape' their homelessness and housing trajectories over time.

## Managing Peer Relationships

Peers featured centrally in young people's accounts of daily life and, by Phase 2 of the study, many viewed the management of their peer networks and disassociation from perceived stigmatised spaces (including homelessness service settings and/or street 'scenes') as playing an important role in their ability to deal with negative past experiences and move towards an independent lifestyle.

*I won't go near town, I'll avoid, I don't talk to anybody that I would have spoke to when I was living in town [referring to homelessness services]. Nobody knows where I am, and that's the way I want to keep it. Once you're out of town it's much easier. I'm staying away from all that shit now, robbing and picking up charges and all. I'm much happier ... I'm trying to just keep the head down and it's going great so far.*

**Paul, 23, Phase 2**

## Education, Training and Employment

Young people identified access to education and labour market participation as critical to their capacity to exit homelessness. Those who had (re)engaged with

education, training and/or employment reported that these transitions had a significant positive impact on their lives in the sense of enhancing their ability to live independently and manage their day-to-day expenses. These young people were also more likely to report a sense of personal direction and achievement.

*[Working is] brilliant, absolutely brilliant. It's nice to be able to just have money, to have a bit of a purpose to get up ... I'm never worried about food, I never worry about having money, the rent will be paid. It's not very often that I'm upset or in a bad mood [anymore], I'm just always, I just feel so good all the time.*

**Paul, 23, Phase 2**

However, a majority of the study's young people faced significant, ongoing barriers to educational engagement and labour market participation. Disengagement from, or limited access to, educational and employment opportunities negatively impacted these young people's sense of self-worth and reinforced their socio-economic marginalisation. A majority felt constrained by the lack of structure and routine in their lives, which often led to feelings of isolation and despair.

*It's a bit of a sad, miserable fucking existence really, do you know, what I mean. I'm not doing nothing like I'm just wasting a life, a fucking life away, that's all its doing.*

**Michael, 25, Phase 2**

## Family Relationship Transitions

The young people's narratives pointed to the dynamic, fluid and changing nature of 'family' and family relationships. Although a return home was not a feasible or realistic option for most, family reconnection and reconciliation was possible for many, particularly with the passing of time. Indeed, familial reconciliation was reported by a number who had previously perceived the resolution of family difficulties to be unlikely.

*I think the distance helped a lot [referring to her relationship with her mother], especially now me having my own life and her kind of having her own life as well. It's a lot better ... more grown up, I suppose. Before it was more ... just could never get along. But now we have a different relationship completely, even since we got back talking. She talks to me a lot different and we have different conversations than we would have had before. It's great to feel like I have them [family] to go to now again.*

**Ashley, 21, Phase 2**

*To be honest, I didn't think I'd ever be as happy as I am now that I'm back with my family ... There's no better feeling.*

**Bryan, 24, Phase 2**

Narratives such as these emphasised the emotional, symbolic and enduring importance that young people attached to family and family ties; these participants viewed family as a cornerstone to the resolution of their homelessness and/or difficulties associated with housing instability, even in circumstances where a return to the family home was not possible.

## The Transition to Parenthood

Twelve of the twenty-nine young people (over 40%) who participated in a follow-up interview were parents and only five of these young people (four young women and one young man) were independently housed. Seven young parents were 'houseless' or living

in situations of 'hidden' homelessness. The challenges associated with parenting in the absence of secure accommodation and social/financial supports were significant and accounts of this nature contrasted sharply with those of young people who had transitioned to stable housing with their child(ren).

*I'm just in constant stress about having nowhere to live while also thinking of the baby, things need to improve for her as well.*

**Maria, 26, Phase 2**

## From Homelessness to 'Home'

Young people who had exited homelessness by Phase 2 of the study identified the transition to stable living situations as a significant 'turning point' in their lives that had distinct and personally significant effects on their sense of 'self' and 'place'. Several talked about the importance of the space, privacy and comfort that secure accommodation had provided, often pointing out that it had enabled them to feel 'in control' of their lives. Housing provided young people with a sense of security, a stable base from which to plan for the future and a sense of connectedness with local community and society more broadly.

*Living kind of away from the [homelessness] services, you get to choose who you're around and so it's a lot different. It was obviously what I needed at the time. But now, I wouldn't go back to it. I'm happy renting, I'm happy having my own space and still obviously linking in with staff is a good thing, but I'm happy to be away from hostels ... I feel more normal. You can kind of do your own thing, have your own life. It's a lot better.*

**Ashley, 21, Phase 2**

Young people's experience of housing and 'home' simultaneously highlighted the complexity and diversity of their individual needs, as well as the varying ways in which they managed and made sense of 'identity' transitions as they navigated a route to stable housing.

# Young People Negotiating a Route to Stable Housing

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Routes to housing stability were unpredictable and precarious for young people. Only a minority (less than one quarter) had exited homelessness by Phase 2, although there were others who had exited temporarily but subsequently returned to homelessness. An array of experiences interacted to produce trajectories that facilitated or, alternatively, hindered or blocked a route to stable housing.

## Young People's Support Systems: The Role of Family and Service Professionals

Family support emerged as an important enabler for some young people as they transitioned through and/or out of homelessness services and this was particularly the case for young mothers in the study who returned home when they learned of a pregnancy. For all young people – including those for whom returning home was not an option – family connectedness conferred a sense of security and, for many, provided an important ‘safety net’, particularly during periods of particular need.



*It was only when I got my family support that I was able to pull myself out of homeless services. Like being in touch with your family can actually stop you from going out and using drugs or tapping [begging] ... I don't think I'd be on such good grounds without it. Like when you're not on solid ground you can start to feel like everything's crumbling, I have my family support and that's good enough for me now.*

**Bryan, 24, Phase 2**

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Young people who had exited homelessness by Phase 2 of the study also frequently talked about the role of formal supports in enabling them to navigate what was depicted as a daunting and intimidating task of sourcing and securing housing. For those who had positive relationships with professionals (including key workers and aftercare workers), the support they received certainly enhanced their ability to source and maintain housing:

- Positive relationships with service staff acted as an important enabler in that young people could avail of practical guidance, assistance and emotional support at critical junctures and transition points.
- Aftercare services provided important supports to young people both ahead of exiting the care system and subsequent to making that transition.

However, it appears that aftercare provision was not experienced uniformly by young people, which led a number to feeling unsupported as they exited the care system and also led them into situations of ‘hidden’ homelessness and housing precariousness.

## Experiences in Housing: Exploring the Contours of Housing (In)stability

Once you've been [homeless] it's a constant feeling of uneasiness; you're never quite secure.

**Maria, 26, Phase 2**

Young people's experiences in housing varied, with some reporting relatively stable and what they perceived as sustainable exits to independent living situations. However, a far larger number of young people had either returned to homelessness following an exit to private rented accommodation or felt that they were at risk of becoming insecurely housed. Many who had experience of the private rented market reported a host of difficulties, not simply related to the challenge of sourcing affordable housing, but also associated with their youth and inexperience of navigating the private rental sector. The challenges reported by young people included:

- › A lack of preparedness for independent living;
- › Problematic tenancy relationships (that is, with landlords or letting agents);
- › Loneliness and social isolation; and
- › Insecurity of tenure.

You're not in control of your housing [when renting a property without a formal lease], you're not in control of your own interests. I don't know, it's just a feeling that you get like you're not in control of your own lease. You're not in control of your stay or how angry they [referring to landlord] could get ... I could lose the place. We don't have tenants' rights.

**Bryan, 24, Phase 2**

Care leavers who were not able to access or avail of targeted aftercare provision typically reported challenges as they made the transition from child to adult services and/or attempted to enter and navigate the private rented market. Financial stress was reported by all who had secured housing at some point over the course of the study and this, combined with other difficulties – including substance use and/or relapse, mental health problems, experiences of domestic violence or criminal justice contact – frequently posed a threat to their housing security. Most young people felt that they did not have adequate support in housing. A number of family members also articulated a perceived need for young people to receive preparation ahead of the move to independent housing, particularly in relation to budgeting and money management, loneliness and mental health issues:

I would be a bit nervous for Maria and for [Maria's daughter] that she would be too isolated and too much on her own, you know?

**Geraldine, Maria's mother, Phase 2**



# Homeless Young People and Housing: Constraints and Barriers of Access

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## Barriers of Access to Affordable Housing

*There is not enough housing so like once you fall into this trap it's very, very hard to get out of it.*

**Michael, 25, Phase 2**

Housing affordability and availability emerged as the key drivers of homelessness and housing exclusion among the study's young people. Almost all of their accounts highlighted *multiple* economic and systemic constraints of access to housing. Problems associated with an unaffordable and highly competitive rental market were frequently compounded by one or more of the following:

- › The poor standard of more affordable rental properties;
- › Restrictive or inadequate rent supplement payments;
- › Protracted waiting periods for social housing;
- › Complex and unmet support needs;
- › A lack of social and economic resources;
- › Delays in accessing rent allowance or other social welfare support; and
- › Discrimination on the part of landlords against those in receipt of rent subsidy.

A lack of affordable accommodation created blockages in the service system and resulted in many young people remaining in homelessness services for significant periods of time, thus producing continued or repeat patterns of homelessness. As a consequence, many expressed feelings of uncertainty, concern and despair about their futures and, in particular, about the enduring nature of their homelessness and whether it would ever be resolved.

*I just feel like giving up. There is nothing around ... Like I can just see myself now just sitting, talking to you [referring to interviewer] for example in another two years time and just having been somewhere else, somewhere else and trying to still get a place. It's just not in my head now that I think I am going to get anywhere.*

**Sophie, 22, Phase 2**

## Perceived Lack of Support and Service Fatigue

*I wouldn't go [to services] because they never helped before. So I don't know why they would now.*

**Phoebe, 25, Phase 2**

Young people who were navigating the service system for longer and perceived little progress with securing housing frequently expressed a sense of service fatigue. Moreover, the absence of a perceived ‘plan’ for securing housing left both young people and their family members feeling “in the dark”. A number of young people also commented on the ‘facelessness’ of their interactions with service providers, which left them feeling dehumanised by the service system:

*Neglected, I felt all that, I felt like I was only a number.*  
**Sophie, 22, Phase 2**

Negative experiences of this kind diminished young people’s engagement with service professionals, in some cases, and did little to empower them to negotiate a route to stable housing. These young people typically expressed a sense of hopelessness about their situations, believing that they were ‘falling through the gaps’ and had ultimately become ‘lost’ in the homeless service system.

*I was more angry that nobody wanted to help me. Psychiatric ward couldn’t help me; everywhere was just like, ‘No. No.’. [Homelessness organisation] couldn’t help me. Everywhere was just palming me onto the next person, the next person, to the next person. And that’s why I just went hell for leather on the drugs then.*

**Joe, 22, Phase 2**

## Living ‘Off Grid’: Young People Seeking Alternative Routes to Housing

In the absence of appropriate or affordable housing options, a considerable number of the study’s young people appeared to seek out alternative routes to what they considered to be more stable forms of accommodation. Their efforts to escape hostel life led many to spending periods living ‘off grid’, essentially in situations of concealed or ‘hidden’ homelessness (that is, living or ‘doubling up’ with family members, friends or acquaintances).

Those who had lived, or were living, in insecure housing of this kind almost always reported overcrowded or undesirable living conditions; most were not accessing (or visible to) formal support services and their accounts invariably emphasised hardships, vulnerabilities and risks. These living situations were highly unstable, not tenable in the longer-term and many of these young people subsequently returned to homelessness services.

*I moved over there, no lease or anything... Was only there about five to six months [and] the landlord came and told all the tenants in the house he was selling up. Now the house is sold and all so he’s after leaving a lot of people homeless ... I went into the [homeless] hostels [then], I did. I felt really angry. I felt really pissed off to be honest. Like the thoughts that go through your head are horrible like especially when you have to walk around the streets and all. That was very depressing.*

**Warren, 26, Phase 2**

# Conclusions

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## Young People's Exits from Homelessness

- › The proportion of young people that had exited homelessness over the course of the study (24%) was extremely low, contrasting strongly with an earlier longitudinal study of youth homelessness in Ireland (Mayock *et al.*, 2008; 2011),<sup>2</sup> which reported far higher rates of exiting (57%) at the first point of follow up, following a one-year period.
- › Those who had exited by Phase 2 of the study were living in either private rented accommodation (n=4) or local authority housing (n=2).

## Implications for Housing First for Youth

- › Internationally, the research evidence base on Housing First for youth is not well developed compared to Housing First for adults.
- › Models of accommodation for youth that fall under the Housing First 'umbrella' take different forms and include transitional housing models in some jurisdictions, including Ireland.
- › Models of housing with a strong supported dimension – including congregate sites where young people share living spaces – have been suggested as appropriate for some young people, particularly those with high support needs.
- › Equally, scattered site Housing First models have been demonstrated to be successful and cost-effective in retaining young people in housing.
- › There is therefore every reason to believe that many young people who experience homelessness will have success in moving *directly* to independent housing.
- › Models of Housing First for youth need to be subjected to rigorous evaluation to assess housing sustainment as well as indicators of health and well-being, cost effectiveness and client satisfaction.

<sup>2</sup> Mayock, P., Corr, M.L. and O'Sullivan, E. (2008) *Young People's Homeless Pathways*. Dublin: The Homeless Agency. Mayock, P., O'Sullivan, E. and Corr, M.L. (2011) 'Young people exiting homelessness: An exploration of process, meaning and definition'. *Housing Studies*, 26(6), 803-826.

## Unsustained Exits from Homelessness

- › A considerable number of the study's young people had exited homelessness at some point over the course of the study but subsequently returned to homeless service settings, pointing to clear problems related to the *sustainability* of homeless exits.
- › Many young people who left the homeless service sector and entered into independent living situations (typically in the private rented sector) did not receive adequate or, in some cases, any follow-on support.

### Implications for Post-homelessness Support

- › Solutions to youth homelessness must extend beyond young people moving into housing and most will need support beyond the point of exiting the service system.
- › While some young people may only need assistance for a short time, others will require sustained, intensive support if they are to successfully maintain independent housing.

## Patterns of Ongoing and Unresolved Homelessness

- › The extent to which young people reported 'houselessness', 'rooflessness', 'insecure' and 'inadequate' housing by Phase 2 of the study, all of which constitute homelessness according to ETHOS, is significant and points to acute challenges and problems with securing appropriate housing for young people who experience homelessness.
- › Those young people who were 'houseless' (n=12) were, in the main, accessing homelessness services in the form of STAs, ETAs and B&B accommodation.
- › Those living in 'insecure' and 'inadequate' housing (n=9) were essentially concealed from the service system and not counted as homeless. All were at risk of re-entering the homeless service system.

### Implications for Preventing Patterns of Repeat Homelessness

- › Tertiary level preventive strategies – which target individuals already affected by homelessness and at risk of repeat homelessness – are essential if patterns of recurring homelessness are to be prevented.
- › When young people re-enter the homeless service sector, their situations and the reasons for their recurrent homelessness need to be fully assessed.

## Facilitators to Exiting Homelessness

- › Family support emerged as an important enabler to young people as they transitioned out of homelessness services.
- › Irrespective of where young people were living, sustained family contact and improved family relationships provided an important safety net at particular points of need.
- › Professional supports helped young people to navigate the private rented sector and to access various welfare supports.
- › Exiting homelessness was a *process* characterised by multiple transitions – in relation to peers, family, engagement with education/training and employment, and so on – not simply an ‘event’ marking a definitive or (necessarily) lasting resolution to young people’s homelessness.

### Implications for Enhancing Support Structures that Promote Homeless Exits

- › When young people enter into the homeless service sector, tailored interventions – that are multi-faceted and developed in consultation with young people – need to be put in place at the earliest possible juncture.
- › Family reconnection programmes must be seen as a central component of a systems-based approach to resolving youth homelessness.
- › Systems-based approaches must also attend to assisting young people into education, training and employment and address any problems related to substance use, mental health and/or other issues (for example, pregnancy, parenthood) affecting their lives.

## Barriers to Exiting Homelessness and Threats to Housing Stability

- › A lack of affordable, appropriate housing was the single most significant barrier to young people exiting homelessness.
- › Problems associated with an unaffordable rental market were exacerbated by the poor standard of more affordable rental properties, the restrictive rent supplement payments available to young people and refusals on the part of landlords to accept tenants in receipt of rent subsidy.
- › Young people were typically entering housing at the lowest end of the quality spectrum. This meant that, while many had accessed housing, sometimes on a number of separate occasions, they did not in fact experience housing stability.
- › The challenge of ongoing substance use problems and/or mental health difficulties was significant for a large number and acted as a barrier to housing access and sustainability.

### Implications for Preventing and Interrupting Long-term Homeless Trajectories

- › The longer the duration of homelessness, the more challenging it becomes to exit and successfully sustain an exit from homelessness. It follows that young people who remain in the homeless service system for longer will need sustained and intensive support if they are to successfully carve a route to independent housing.
- › Secure housing – alongside the provision of additional services and supports as needed – must be seen as an essential first step in the resolution of their homelessness.
- › The development and expansion of housing models and options for homeless young people – including Housing First approaches – requires urgent attention. All housing programmes targeting youth must be subjected to rigorous evaluation.

# Living in Limbo

## Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing

This publication presents key findings from a qualitative longitudinal study of youth homelessness in Ireland. Initiated in 2013, the research was designed to 'track' the flow of events and experiences that impact young people's homeless and housing trajectories *over time*. The research makes an innovative departure from previous studies, both in Ireland and elsewhere, by including the views and perspectives of a family member of approximately one quarter of the study's young people. Building on a previous report – *Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion* – that documented findings from the first phase of the research (Mayock *et al.*, 2014), this publication is concerned primarily with uncovering the drivers of young people's 'journeys' through and possibly out of homelessness and their experiences of accessing housing. The findings presented mark a critical contribution to our understanding of youth homelessness and will be of particular interest to policy-makers, researchers and students, as well as to professionals involved in the design and delivery of housing and support services to marginalised youth populations.



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