The Process of Youth Homelessness: A Qualitative Longitudinal Study
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Introduction
In Ireland, relatively little is known about how and why young people become homeless or about their life experiences either prior or subsequent to becoming homeless. Little is also known about the circumstances and experiences that bring about positive or negative change in the lives of young people who experience homelessness.

- This study set out to conduct a detailed investigation of the homeless ‘careers’ of young people using a qualitative longitudinal approach.
- The research aimed to generate an in-depth understanding of the process of youth homelessness with a specific focus on the identification of trajectories into, through and out of homelessness.

Methodology
- A longitudinal, qualitative design was adopted to allow for the investigation of homeless experiences over time.
- The study has been conducted in three phases:
  - Phase I: September 2004 – January 2005
  - Phase II: September 2005 – August 2006
  - Phase III: January 2009 – ongoing.
- The Life History Interview is the core method of data collection. Previous research has highlighted the utility of a biographical analysis when seeking to develop an understanding of the complex interplay of factors that can lead a person to becoming, remaining or exiting homelessness (Mayoock, 2000).
- Structured questionnaires were also administered at Phases I and II. One of these focused on experiences of crime and victimisation and the second on mental health.

The Sample
Phase I: 40 young people (23 male and 17 female) were recruited for participation at the outset of the study. All were aged between 14 and 22 years and were homeless or living in unstable accommodation.

Phase II: 30 young people (16 male and 14 female), aged between 15 and 24 years, were re-interviewed.

Phase III: 28 young people (15 male and 13 female), aged between 20 and 28 years, have so far been re-interviewed.

Findings
Phase I: Becoming Homeless
Despite significant diversity in young people’s stories of becoming homeless, three broad pathways or routes into homelessness were identified. These were associated with:
- 1. A history of state care.
- 2. Household instability or family conflict
- 3. Negative peer associations and problematic behaviour.

- The stability of many of the young people’s home or care situations was undermined at an early age and this instability created a high level of vulnerability to homelessness.

Phase II: Young People’s Homeless Pathways
- By Phase II, the vast majority of young people had moved to alternative accommodation; most had experienced at least one housing transition since their Phase I interview and a considerable number had lived in multiple living situations during that period.
- Young people’s housing situations and transitions were categorised into three homeless pathways. Within these pathways young people shared a general trend in their movement either out of homelessness or towards more chronic homeless states.

Pathway I: Independent Exits from Homelessness
7 young people (5 females and 2 females) exited homelessness independently, having either moved home or into the private rented sector.

- Moving Home
  - Continued contact with and support from family members throughout a young person’s homeless experience facilitated a smoother transition back to the family home.
  - Conditions (imposed by parents), such as seeking or remaining in drug treatment and disassociating from former peers, were almost always attached to a young person’s move home.

Pathway II: Dependent Exits from Homelessness
10 young people made dependent exits from homelessness, having moved to transitional housing (TH) or state care.

- The move to TH was facilitated by: support from family members and/or professionals and participation in education or training. Many had treated a process of distancing themselves from former peer networks and street ‘scenes’.
- These young people faced a number of challenges including financial difficulties and problems with budgeting, cooking and eating healthily. Many also reported feelings of loneliness and depression.

Pathway III: Continued Homelessness
13 young people, 11 of them male, remained homeless. Most were aged 19 years old or under.

- They depended on the most unstable living situations moved constantly between emergency hostels.
- As their homeless ‘careers’ progressed, they became immersed in a homeless lifestyle and relied increasingly on others in a similar situation to themselves for help and support.

Conclusions
- Young people who experience homelessness can exit and transition to stable living situations. Put differently, homelessness need not result in an inevitable downward spiral towards chronic homeless states.
- Facilitators to exiting homelessness include: access to appropriate/affordable housing; family and professional support; lack of movement between unstable living conditions; participation in education and training; change in peer networks; treatment; and connectedness to others in a similar situation to themselves for help and support.

Selected Publications

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